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# KUNAPIPI

VOLUME 2 NUMBER 1  
1980

## DANGAROO PRESS



### **BIRD, HAWK, BOGIE:**

*Essays on Janet Frame*

*Edited by Jeanne Delboure*

This is the first collection of essays to appear on Janet Frame. Each of her novels is discussed separately by one of the contributors. The book also contains an essay by the West Indian writer Wilson Harris, a substantial introduction by the editor and an annotated checklist of critical writings on Janet Frame.

Danish kroner 50.

### **ENIGMA OF VALUES: an introduction**

*Edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford*

ENIGMA OF VALUES: an introduction contains a chapter describing the critical approach to literature of the West Indian writer and critic Wilson Harris. When he was guest lecturer in Commonwealth literature at Aarhus University, Denmark in 1973 Wilson Harris developed his ideas on the novel as an open form susceptible of renewal and traced attempts to break through the accepted conventions of fiction in works written in the last century or so. The other essays in this book offer interpretations of well-known novels, which take into account Wilson Harris's critical ideas.

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*Hena Maes-Jelinek*

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Danish kroner 20.

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Kunapipi



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VOLUME 2 NUMBER 1  
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*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.

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# Kunapipi

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The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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# Does it Matter About Don Mattera?

In a country like South Africa where separation of the races is the official policy, it is not infrequent to witness individual efforts to breach the walls and establish a multi-racial solidarity. The presence in jail and among the banned of members of all the communities testifies to it, as do the homages paid from all quarters to the militants and/or writers who have committed themselves to real, meaningful changes and have died, been imprisoned or silenced in the process. Don Mattera is one of them.

The Mattera family cast roots in South Africa in 1904 when Francesco Mattera, then 26 years old and a sailor from Naples, jumped ship while in Cape Town and married a Griqua woman. He went to work in the Kimberley mines, made some money there and eventually founded one of the first bus companies for Africans in Johannesburg. He settled in near-by Sophiatown where the family, through inter-racial union or marriage, became as cosmopolitan as the city. Don Mattera, Francesco's grandson, was born in 1935. Left at first in the care of his paternal grandparents, he was later sent to a Catholic school in Durban which accommodated orphans and children from broken homes. There, he was brought up the hard way, his rebellious spirit grew; there he learnt the English language and 'English' manners; there, too, he became a boxing champion.

When he went back to Sophiatown in 1950, the Mattera clan was no longer holding itself together, the Nationalist Party had come to power and Johannesburg was one of the worst places in the world for *tsotsim* (hooliganism) and crime. Don Mattera joined one of the youthful gangs whose leadership he assumed very quickly. He had several brushes with the police and even served a brief spell in jail. Yet he somehow managed to finish school, getting a second-class pass Matric in 1957.

By then, he was having second thoughts about making his way in life

through the power of the fist or the knife. A son had been born to him and *tsotsism* appeared at last for what it really was — and still is — a mis-directed form of violence through which some of the oppressed get their own back on society to the detriment of their own brothers and sisters. Besides, there were more useful things to be done for a youth whose political awareness was growing. Boycotts and mass-demonstrations were being organized by the 'non-whites' to protest against the implementation of the first apartheid laws which defined the various racial groups and started setting them apart from each other where they co-existed. The convening of the Congress of the People and the subsequent adoption of the Freedom Charter (1965) testify to the growing militancy of both the oppressed and the white extra-parliamentary opposition. But the boycott of the Bantu Education Act was a failure, as were the attempts to oppose the destruction of Sophiatown destined to become a suburb for new White immigrants. It was in Sophiatown that Mattera came to know Father Huddleston and a few white radicals such as Joe Slovo and Dennis Goldberg, the latter later condemned to a life sentence for his part in the resistance.

Don Mattera belonged for a while to the Youth League of the African National Congress, then joined the more radical Pan-Africanist Congress, both organizations being banned after Sharpeville (1960). He later joined the Coloured Labour Party which was the only body where he could still be politically active, but he was yearning to struggle again side by side with his darker brothers, an opportunity which presented itself in 1971 with the foundation of the Black People's Convention. Don Mattera took his large share of the conscientization then taking place but his activities were brought to an abrupt end when he was banned in 1973. His banning order, renewed in 1978 for another five years, forbids him to address meetings, to be in groups of more than two persons, to leave his place of residence and to publish or prepare for (personal) publication. The crazy laws of the country still allow him to work for a living: Don Mattera serves as a sub-editor on the staff of *The Star*, one of the leading English-language newspapers. But he is cut off from normal life and from the vital communication with his fellow human beings. Many seasons have passed since Wally Serote wrote for him (in *Tsetlo*, Ad. Donker, 1974) the beautiful poem that follows; but how many more will have to pass before Don Mattera is free?

... it is a dry white season brother  
only the trees know the pain as they still stand erect  
dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,  
indeed, it is a dry white season  
but seasons come to pass...

It is worth examining Don Mattera's place among his contemporaries, not only in the political field but, this time, in the closely-connected literary one. For he is little known to the outside world, having published but little and now being prevented from doing so, and although, like many other black writers of the seventies, he is no professional, yet he is far from being insignificant.

His autobiography, *Gone with the Twilight*, will, when it is published, rank among the most fitting, valuable tributes paid to the Sophiatown that was. Like his two predecessors, Bloke Modisane (*Blame Me On History*, 1963) and Can Themba (*The Will to Die*, 1972), Don Mattera, some ten years younger than they were, evokes magnificently the multi-racial community which lived in Sophiatown before this very togetherness was forbidden by law. Don Mattera relates his childhood and youth, the moments of happiness and those of sorrow, the partings and the reunions (the former more frequent than the latter). He describes his family and friends and the motley crowd of the seeming, bustling city, the exploited and the exploiters, the priests of various denominations, finally the gangs and the police. They all come alive in a wealth of picturesque details, chunks and slices of a rich, pithy life with its mixture of little joys and tragedies, its humour and tenderness and the overall humanity that transcended the barriers of language and colour (see documents I and II). The descriptions themselves seem to come straight from his youth, passionate, idealistic, vibrant with indignation or pathos. More lyrical passages occur when he relates the actual destruction of the houses where they had all lived and tells of the feelings of dispossession and uprootedness that were theirs. Here is a moving, though precise, testimony on the disappearance of a community and the passing of an era.

His poems are no less interesting for they straddle the period from Sharpeville and its aftermath of defeat and despair to the pre-Soweto days with their spirit of defiance and challenge; they also reflect the evolution of the late sixties and early seventies, associated as they are with the Black Consciousness Movement.

Mattera starts with poems descriptive of everyday life, concentrating mainly on the depersonalisation of the black man under the influence of oppression: a beggar murmuring 'thank you, baas', to one of his own brothers, black men queuing up for their pay or for their passes, or being arrested by other black men (document III).

Two themes soon emerge which are closely connected with each other. The first one — the plight of the country — is expressed in warm terms reminiscent of Dennis Brutus: Mattera also addresses South Africa as he would address a loved one, and the several variations all demonstrate the poet's deep concern for his country and his wish to see destruction and havoc avoided (document IV).

The second theme is couched in far more bitter terms. Mattera, here, takes the white man to task for his lack of true religion and general inhumanity. These are no Christians, he says, who edict such cruel laws and limit their religiousness to church-going and an occasional breast-beating. The word 'pharisee', either explicit or in filigree, can be found in many of these poems, the interrogation of the early days eventually becoming outright rejection (document V).

This protest poetry of the first kind — because it simply enumerates the evils — gradually becomes a more defiant one. The white man who, at first, was referred to indirectly in the third person ('they') is, at a later stage, addressed with a vindictive 'you' and finally pushed in the background as Mattera turns primarily to his black brothers. Like his colleagues of the Black Consciousness Movement, he has realized that the black man is truly on his own, that his passivity and lack of combativeness play a part in the perpetuation of apartheid. The time for reasoning and praying is over: the black man must now stand up and claim his rights. The 'We've had enough' theme comes up over and over again under different forms, at first a cry of anguish and then a declaration of war. The rhetoric has clearly a mobilizing purpose but it is also meant as a therapy, for the black man has internalized the white man's deprecation of himself (documents VI and VII).

Yet, even at this stage, the liberation of minds is difficult to achieve. Or rather the poet, like many other Blacks, is seen as incapable of/unwilling to resort to the same violence as that of the rulers. Mattera's basic humanism appears in numerous poems (document VIII) and his 'I can't hate' echoes other black voices, notably Serote's. While the word 'love' is certainly the one that recurs most frequently throughout the collection, Mattera cannot but foresee the violent confrontation that the

Nationalists' obdurate refusal to grant the Blacks their lawful rights will inevitably cause (document IX).

The political import of some of the poems, especially those written in the early seventies, points to a growing didacticism on the part of Mattera. Some poems are obviously meant to 'teach a lesson'; yet, Don Mattera is no politician suddenly turned to literature or prose-writer converted to verse. There is in him a genuine urge to write poetry, and to write other things than those pressed on him by the 'situation'. The number of lyrics is important: some end up with the poet's main preoccupations. But others develop fully and reveal sensitivity, sense of structure and unquestionable talent of expression (see documents X and XI).

While Don Mattera's more recent poetry is, perforce, unavailable, the body of work that exists is by no means negligible. It must be seen alongside that of Mshali, Matthews, Serote, Sepamla and Pascal Gwala as highly representative of the period from Sharpeville to Soweto: the new Black is reflected here at the same time as he is being addressed. Some of Mattera's poems antedate those of his colleagues while others echo them; but he has his 'own' voice, and he will have to be reckoned with as soon as his works are published. This could only happen if he were unbanned, a decision that Mattera is not seeking. If the reasons for this attitude can be understood — there are other people banned with whom Mattera feels complete solidarity, and what really matters is the total eradication of apartheid — yet one may wonder how much longer the free world will tolerate the continuation of such damaging practices which have nothing to do with the administration of justice. The banned have never been taken to court, they have not even committed any 'crime'. Clearly, they as a whole, as well as Mattera in particular, are being destroyed, as they would no doubt be if they had to go into 'voluntary' exile. They need all the support that can be mustered to remain in their own country as free individuals (see document XII for his open letter to white South Africans).

In Winter 1966, moved by yet another banning of black writers, Lionel Abrahams had asked (in *The Purple Renoster*), in the light of the predominating silence from a majority of the White community, if it mattered about Dennis Brutus — who was but one of the banned. If today we ask in turn if it matters about Don Mattera, we are underlining the lack of progress of the last fourteen years and exposing for what they really are the assertions of change and liberalization currently being made in South Africa.

If Prime Minister P. W. Botha wants to be believed, let him first open the prisons where the political prisoners rot, let him ungag the silenced, some of whom, like Mary Moodley who died recently, have been under a ban for 15 years. Let him call a National Convention of all leaders, at home and in exile, where the Whites will have to talk with, and not down to, the Blacks. Let him not waste one minute longer the extraordinary human potential which is still available in South Africa. Let the country see, in a few years and within its own borders, arise a situation similar to the one that prevailed in Zimbabwe. Can't Southern Africa save itself the expense of another Lancaster House Conference, with the thousands of casualties that would precede it?

## DOCUMENT 1

I am a second-generation Coloured. A product of miscegenation. The fruit of in-between existence. The appendage of Black and White. My father, Bosquala Graaf Mattera, was born of an Italian sailor and a Griqua washer-woman. My mother, Agnes Dinkie Lebakeng (still alive at the time of writing this account) was born of simple Tswana parents. They were not married. I was born in Johannesburg's Western Native Township in December of 1935. My maternal grandfather named me Monnapula (Tswana for Man of the Rain) because I came with a heavy rainfall after weeks of dryness. My mother was only sixteen years old when I was born and so it would be fine to say that we grew up together.

Things were tough on my African grandparents because they were poor and had other children to support: they placed me in the care of my paternal grandparents, who registered me as one of their own, the last of nine children.

I was parted from my mother. She had taken up employment at what is known among Black people as the 'kitchens'. Meaning that she worked for some white family in the rich northern suburbs of Johannesburg. I only saw her at some weekends and I remember the lovely things she brought with her — clothes, cakes, sweets and all that. My father's people loved her and she was beautiful, with lovely sleek legs and a body to match. Snookie, a man I knew well, used to call her 'English lady'. I can't recall though, that she and my father ever met. He had many women, mostly Africans, and they were all very beautiful. But, with all the apartness, I still loved both of them, I guess.

I loved all my grandparents. To me, having a European grandpa was no different to having a Tswana one. I mean, which child then, would have noticed what children, especially the white ones, are alert to, now. There were real differences of course; one household had more food than the other and it must have been natural for me to favour the house where food was abundant. Game, fruit, salads and delicious Italian dishes smiled appetizingly from my paternal grandparents' dinner-table. There was enough wood and coal. And there was money.

My grandfather, Francesco Paolo Mattera, came to South Africa from Naples, Italy, in 1904. He was 26 and a sailor in the merchant navy. His parents were farmers and his taste for adventure, which began with street-singing led him to the shores of Cape Town. He jumped ship, and after roaming friendless through the City, met my grandmother, Minnie Booyers-Rawana. A narrow-eyed beauty with a copper-coloured skin of Xhosa-Dutch and Griqua extraction. They married at a Dutch mission at Graaf Reiner, the birth place of my grandmother.

There was no law against marriage between black and white in South Africa, then. They loved each other and that was all that mattered. He often told us, 'Dat time, no beeznotz lika now. You marreed, who you marreed. Nobaady he say who dis man or dat womman. No law to breakka a man an his womman...'

It never occurred to me then, what he meant or what the broken English was trying to convey. It was not until later, much later when I was infatuated by what was 'love' for Poppy, an Afrikaner girl who lived in neighbouring Westdene, that I understood. She was a girl I often chased around innocently when she came to visit the Theunissens, her coloured family who lived in my street. Her mother called me a 'Kaffir' and set the dogs on me when Poppy and I talked. They threatened me with arrest because she was a white girl.

Later, too, I saw and read what the broken English had tried so hard to tell me... It was different in those days. People were more worried about fighting the trials of existence. Too preoccupied with their own lives and problems to really care about who married who. Or what an Italian sailor was doing with his Griqua wife in bed.

In the years that were to follow, the racial sensitivity on the subject of love between white and black accentuated itself in various forms, in many walks of life. The bodies of white men and women were made holy and there was to be no love, let alone sexual intercourse with black people. I understood what the old man said and hated myself for having laughed...



The Mattera family was as cosmopolitan as Sophiatown. My two aunts had been proposed to by the sons of rich Italian immigrant families, some of whom also had businesses and bus companies. Carlo, whose empire was built on building buses, was a close friend of my Papa, as I used to call my grandpa. My aunt Rosina, who had a beautiful voice, married a man called Francisco Pereira, whose father was Portuguese and his mother Coloured. They had a dark featured son, Frank, who committed suicide. His death occurred a month after our Sophiatown homes were demolished...

My aunt Baby, whose name was Helena, married a Scotsman who had quite a temper and had formerly been a professional racing-driver. Their only son Chossie had no trace of Coloured features. His nose was straight, his eyes green and his hair ginger-brown. My uncle Willy had a white woman called Tilly who had sleek, long hair that fell over her left eye. Tilly was always beautifully dressed and she and my grandma got on quite well. Then Willy joined the South African army to fight against the Germans. It was also the last we saw of our lovely Tilly...

My three uncles, Danny, Frankie and Goon, had many different women. There were African, Coloured and Indian varieties, whom I had to call aunt. But I understood. My own father had an African staff nurse, who was beautiful as she was kind. My family was a symbol of the multi-racial complexion of Sophiatown. There were other white men, like the Rosenbergs, Theunissens, Rademeyers, Janofskis, Jannssens, Hauptfs and a host of others, who shared the cosmopolitan Sophiatown with more than 200,000 Africans, Indians, Coloured and Chinese, many of whom were brought into the world by the hands of my granny. She worked until the early hours of the morning, delivering babies...

Without the Mattera family, there would have been no real Sophiatown, many used to tell me. If there was death, go to Matticks (what people called the old man). If someone needed to be got out of jail, go to the Matteras — the people with the buses and the cars — they would give the money. If there was no food, go and ask, because there was always bread and food at the Italian's place. He would surely give. Cripples, healthy beggars, some in tattered disguise, came, like the not-so-rich white people, especially government officials and members of the police who never left empty-handed. This was the character of my family and it was part of the nature of Sophiatown. This was the family that had taken me in from my Tswana relatives and opened a different way of life to me...

## DOCUMENT II

I had many brushes with the police. Like the time I alighted from a train on a visit to my mother in one of the African townships. A tall, African policeman stopped me. His huge hands gripped my belt, pulling my trousers against my private parts.

'Pass', he shouted, so that others heard.

'I'm a Coloured', I answered, knowing this to be the password of privilege and temporary safety and immunity. It would work now, as it had several times before.

'Half-caste Boesman, is what you mean', he said in Afrikaans, tightening his lethal grip, so that my testicles moved into my bladder, and consciously aware of his power, he pressed harder. Urine ran down my thigh, wetting his hand. A blow stunned my senses. Half-blinded, I sagged and his grip loosened. As I was coming to another shot crushed into my ribs. Darkness. When I looked up there was a Boer policeman poking his baton at my exposed testicles.

'Was verkeerd bruin balas (What's wrong brown balls?)' I tried to tell but instead he ordered me to leave. I turned to the African and promised I would get him someday.

'Get your kaffir-mother, you sonofabitch', he shouted again, to attract the attention of bystanders. Some people laughed. A woman tried to help but I pulled away.

All my mother said when I told her of the incident was, that I was beginning to understand humiliation, which was a way of life for Africans.

'Now you know a bit. With Coloureds it is different. You have many rights and privileges. Your colour ensures you status and a future. No pass, no permits and influx control. It's bad when your skin is black. Now, I'm happier that I gave you to your father's people, otherwise you would have suffered', she told me without pity.

I argued that the policeman was an African and yet he beat me without regard for my age. She replied that he stopped being an African when he wore a police badge. He became something totally different. A tool. A robot. Something else but not an African. Being an African was something great, transcending and valuable, with an open heart, she said. I loved her for giving me something better than pity. She helped me to understand and believe that being an African was beautiful and I wanted more than anything to become one...

## DOCUMENT III

### RUBBER STAMP

Black men stare fixedly  
at the baked brick building  
in Albert Street

They stand like statues  
carved in grease and sweat  
polished with the slime of frustration  
against Chinese-owned 'native-eating houses'

Where were you born  
What's your tribe  
Who's your chief  
Where's your permit...

Black men stare fixedly  
at the powerful rubberstamp  
in its path of destruction and heartbreak  
lord and master of hungry men and women  
degraded in their own land  
abused by the rubberstamp  
in a white man's hand...

## DOCUMENT IV

### GOD BLESS AFRICA

Sea and sand  
my love my land,

God bless Africa  
but more the South of Africa  
with its angry mountains  
and smiling hills  
where the water spills  
to cool the earth's heated brow

God bless the children  
of South Africa,  
the Black and the White children  
but more the Black children  
who lost the sea and the sand  
that they may not lose love  
for the White children who took the land  
Sea and sand  
my love my land  
God bless Africa  
but more the  
South of Africa

## DOCUMENT V

### OFFERING

To say that you love  
and offer it  
to a dream

To say you love that dream  
and offer it  
to man

To say that you love man  
and yet offer him  
to God as Cain did his brother

To say rather no such love  
nor dream nor offering  
and what of no God?

## DOCUMENT VI

### NO TIME, BLACK MAN

Stand Black man  
and put that cap  
back on your beaten head

Look him in the eye  
cold and blue  
like devil's fire  
and tell him enough  
three centuries is more  
than you can take, Enough!

Let him hear it  
if he turns his face and sneers  
spit and tell him shit  
it's all or nothing  
he's got all  
and you have nothing

Don't bargain with oppression  
there isn't time man,  
just no more time  
for the Black man  
to fool around

## DOCUMENT VII

### OF REASON AND DISCOVERY

I have dispensed with reasoning  
It blinded me to many wrongs  
nearly robbed me of sanity  
I once reasoned with the whiteman's evil  
saw his crimes against my people  
his weakness and human folly  
God would right the wrong, they said

But they did not say when  
So, I have dispensed with reasoning  
for it clouds a Blackman's vision  
blunts his wrath and makes him tolerant  
of his oppression

I have discovered, yes  
the reason for all this hurt  
this long deep searching  
of scanning the Godless sky  
for the suspended reply

I have discovered, yes  
the fault not in the God  
nor the pain, but the sufferer  
who makes virtue of his anguish  
and waits meekly on the God  
for deliverance  
though white scavengers rip flesh  
from his battered black bones

I have discovered, yes  
the yoke is comfortable  
when the belly is full  
and there is time to pray for peace  
though police guns rattle on mine-dunes\*  
in the name of protection and order

I have discovered, yes  
that an ounce of gold  
exceeds the value of a Blackman's life  
and there is no more time to reason and pray

Yes, I have discovered, yes...

\* a reference to the Carletonville Mine shootings, 1973

## DOCUMENT VIII

### AND YET

I have known silences  
long and deep as death

when the mind  
questioned the logic  
of my frailty  
in the imminence  
of my destruction  
by men ruled and ravaged  
by powerlust

I have known deep silences  
when thoughts like angry waves  
beat against the shores  
of my mind  
revealing the scars  
of brutal memories  
of trampled dignity  
and the murder  
of my manhood

and yet

I cannot hate  
try as I want to  
I cannot hate, WHY?

## DOCUMENT IX

### OF LIFE, OF DEATH

Even as we live  
let us remember the dying  
as we clench our fists  
against the robbery of life  
cursing our subjugation,  
let us assess the quantity  
of life lost  
and how much of the dying  
we can expect to know

As for me  
I have reached the cross

If there is love, then it will be shared  
with them that are moved by it  
If hatred is to be, then  
it will be learned  
for what it teaches and not  
what it would make of me

And, if there is to be life  
let it be new, abundant, meaningful  
throbbing in me, in my children  
in my deluded brothers  
a life, born out of the lives of men  
striving for justice and freedom

Yet, if there is to be a dying  
if corpses must commune  
with gutter grime,

THEN LET THEM,

I will fall lovingly  
assured I would rise again  
to testify for the aftermath  
that all my brothers may come together  
to rebuild what their fathers destroyed

## DOCUMENT X

### DEPARTURE

I grow tired  
and want to leave this city  
seething in unrest and injustice  
I am leaving  
no, I have left  
look at me  
on the banks of the Nile  
under some spreading palm  
I shall be sleeping  
the sleep of freedom



do not wake me  
leave me to dream  
my dream of departure  
from this city  
seething in unrest  
void of pity  
for I have grown weary  
of eating the brine  
and long for jungle fruit

## DOCUMENT XI

### AT LEAST

This day at least  
let me see the hours through  
without a wince  
of discontent  
as I drop  
the heavy cloak  
of bitter resolve  
to welcome the infiltration  
of warmth and love and beauty

This day at least  
let me be moved away  
from the ghosts  
of pained exhortation  
that lacerate the heart  
embittered emotion

For these brief  
somewhat fleeting hours  
while the crisp laughter  
of the wind fills me deeply  
O my land,  
at least for this untroubled day  
let me unclench my being  
to stroke the yellow flowers

## DOCUMENT XII

### OPEN LETTER TO SOUTH AFRICAN WHITES

To you, I may be just another name. Just another number in a sea of black faces. To your government and to your Secret Police, I am a **PERSONA NON GRATA**... An enemy of the State who must be silenced or destroyed.

To those true Black people, who share with me a destiny as Children of Africa, I firmly believe that I am a spokesman for Justice and Freedom and Equality... A man moved by the plight and pain of my oppressed brothers and sisters.

I am addressing you as a nation and at the same time, I am also aware that many valiant white men and women have raised their voices, offered their lives and the lives of their families in the cause of freedom for all people. I am constantly mindful of their great sacrifice and I know and am convinced that they will forever be enshrined in the hearts of Black people.

I have chosen an Open Letter, because your government has arbitrarily denied me my right publicly to express my feelings. My writings have been outlawed and nothing that I say can be published. My very thoughts are branded a danger to the security of the State, which in the final analysis, is **REALLY YOU**.

Since the crimes you and your government have perpetrated against my people are innumerable and since I lack the courage to rise up against you in their name, and most of all because I hate violence; I will confine this letter to the irreparable damage you and your government have personally caused me and my family.

Until this day, I have ever been united with those who suffer, are poor; with the sick and the dying. It was an inheritance from my family.

Yet for nearly six years now, with four more to follow, perhaps until I die, your government has summarily cut me, and countless others, off from the very vital and precious life-giving force called **HUMAN INTERACTION**.

Perhaps your government has told **YOU** why it took the criminal decision to deny and rob me and my colleagues of all social, political and human intercourse with our fellow-beings; making it a crime even to speak to a group of children.

I was given no reason whatsoever.

And did any of you ask your government why I am prohibited from attending my daughter's birthday party? Or why I must wait outside a hall when my own son is being handed a trophy or a badge? Or why I have to ask your Chief Magistrate for permission to attend the funeral of a loved one or a friend or a great leader?

Have any of you ever been prohibited from weeping at a graveside?

Well, I have been.

Have any of you white people experienced the horror of raids by the Secret Police? Do you know how humiliating it is to hear that loud and vicious banging at the door, and watch helplessly as armed police search the house, pulling blankets off the sleeping children? Searching, scratching and stamping, until the whole damn house is filled with hatred and anger.

Have any Afrikaner mothers or wives ever sat up wide-eyed on their beds, afraid and bewildered with tears flowing uncontrollably as the husband is bundled into a police vehicle?

Well, my wife has.

And, has any white ten-year-old boy ever run barefoot into the night to the waiting police car and, with his fragile fists, banged against the door, crying and screaming as his father is taken away to some cold and dark cell, perhaps never to return again?

My little son has done just that. And it is the same child that rushes to switch off the television set when your South African flag and your anthem appear at the end of the programmes.

I am not telling you these things out of self-pity. Nor do I want to be unbanned. These things are being said that you, unlike the German nation, cannot tomorrow say: 'BUT WE DID NOT KNOW...' For you there must be no excuse. History will be the judge.

I don't think that you can answer these questions unless you are a HELEN JOSEPH, a BRAAM FISCHER or a BEYERS NAUDE. Or any of those white men and women who have stood up to be counted, and are dead or suffering as a result of their consciences. Also, I don't think you have the capacity for such remorse as would move me to say: 'Forgive them for they know not what they do...'

You know what you do.

And what is being done in your name.

Yes, day by day, bitterness and anger overwhelm me, robbing me of clear thoughts; transforming me to a near vegetable. I have been so demeaned that I can no longer truly fulfil myself as a poet or a person.

And today, my children, affected by this terrible change in me, reflect the bitterness I carry within my heart. I don't know why, though I have tried very hard, I cannot hate you. But my children watch me closely: laughing when I laugh, crying when I am sad. Asking me, forever asking me why it is that I endure so much pain and humiliation. Or why the setting sun no longer moves me. Or why I have rejected Christianity.

They will find the answers.

And no doubt this letter will hurt and offend you and your government, especially your Secret Police. If I know you, as I know your rulers, these words will spur you to vengeance and violence against me. Against my family. It has happened before, but I do not care.

I am prepared to die.

All documents courtesy of INDEX ON CENSORSHIP, 21, Russell Street, London, who have published excerpts from Don Mattera's work in their 4/1974, 5/1978 and 1/1980 issues and to whom we express our thanks.



Don Mattera

# Nadine Gordimer

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## INTERVIEW

Johannes Riis interviewed Nadine Gordimer when she was in Copenhagen in October 1979.

*Burger's Daughter seems to be a further culmination of the disillusion, not only with the South African white liberal movement, which is to be found in your writing from around 1960, but also with the efforts made by more radical whites for the liberation of South Africa?*

Don't confuse the views of a large range of characters with the view of the writer... *The Late Bourgeois World* from 1966 shows the breakdown of my belief in the liberal ideals. The main character in that book, Liz, must realize that she can get no farther on the line she has been following; she has got as far as her liberal ideals can get her, and her dilemma is now a new one: shall she turn radical and go on to a more binding commitment, do something really dangerous and give in to the black radical Luke's wish to use her bank account to bring in money for his revolutionary movement — or should she give up her activities completely? The book ends on an ambiguous note: her heart repeating 'like a clock, afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive...' And what is going to happen? I wonder. Afterwards it is always interesting to look back upon a book and consider: what will have happened to this or that character. Liz, I think, will have married her lover Humphrey, who is a lawyer, followed his line and worked with him for the liberation of South Africa, but in the 'constitutional way', within the system, using the institutions of the stage. And she will most certainly have gone on not believing in this way.

This book really marks the end of what I had to say about white liberalism in South Africa, and since then I have gone further in social analysis. I think that this breakdown of belief was foreshadowed already in *Occasion for Loving* with its description of an affair between a black

and a white character. That book, however, ended on a note of hope. You see, during the 1950s, we believed very strongly in the personal relationship, in the possibility that in changed circumstances blacks would view us as fellow human beings — *face to face*, acknowledging all of us as individuals: the Forsterian 'only connect' lay behind what we did and believed in. But we underestimated the strength of the government, we floated in rarefied air; we did not realize the economic forces we were up against and willy-nilly represented. We were very sincere and well-meaning and naïve, but I still think that whatever the illusions and mistakes were, the attitudes from those years have had an influence, and a positive one, on the attitudes now to be found among both blacks and whites in South Africa. I think that whatever little understanding there is left now between whites and blacks may originate from the liberal era. One should not discount this psychological effect; it cannot be measured, but I am sure it is still there. Of course it is extremely sad and discouraging — if totally inevitable — to see how the blacks have turned particularly against the white liberals in recent years. But let whites remember how much pain and discouragement blacks had to suffer before they faced the necessity to liberate *themselves*. There is a conflict between good intentions and the burden of history. You have to be equal to the demands of your time and place.

*Irony has always been an essential element in your narrative technique, and increasingly so. Have you ever considered why?*

Really, irony comes to me involuntarily, unconsciously. Proust said (I paraphrase) style is born of the meeting between the writer and his situation. In a society like that of South Africa, where a decent *legal* life is impossible, a society whose very essence is false values and mutual distrust, irony lends itself to you, when you analyse what happens. Let me give an example from 'The Amateurs', my short story from *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, which is based very much on a personal experience. I wrote it when I was very young — about 20, I had no theories about literature then.

It is a story about a group of amateur actors and actresses who go out to put on a performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* for a black audience in a black township. It was based on something that happened to me. I was one of the members of this group. I was going to play Gwendolen and was dressed up in a marvellous dress with a bustle and

false bosom, all of which made me look like an hourglass. I saw myself in the mirror and really felt the cat's whiskers. Here we were, taking culture to the blacks. I had never been in a black township before, it was filthy, ghastly, all of the story's descriptions of the environment are absolutely true to what I saw. I think I suffered a sort of culture shock in my native country: what I saw was so vastly different from the white world I knew, and yet so close in distance a few miles from where I lived. And who were we, feeling superior, showing off European culture in this South African dorp, to an audience with no background for understanding what we were doing, an audience whose own culture we did not know at all?

When I wrote the story I was only registering and interpreting what I had actually seen. I used empathy in that story. I intended no irony, it entered on its own. The irony in this story is a by-product of my looking back on the episode, of the process of understanding it, shortly after. But as I said earlier on, irony is an appropriate way of tackling South Africa. Dan Jacobson's *A Dance in the Sun*, which I consider one of the best presentations of the South African tragedy from the white point of view, supports this view.

*In your writing, irony seems to become still more persuasive, subtler and subtler, and from time to time this makes it hard for a 'new' reader with no frame of reference to your writing as a whole to grasp the meaning, for there are hardly any fixed points: I have found for example 'Africa Emergent' to be such a story.*

It is true that there are more direct statements, explicit comments, and breast beating and less irony in my earliest stories (e.g. in *Face to Face*) than in the later ones. It has to do with the belief I had then in the liberal ideals, but it is just as much due to my lack of writing ability at that time. Had I written say, 'Which New Era Would That Be?' — it dates from my early thirties — earlier on, I would not have let Jake's turning up the gas and kicking the chair in the end of the story, after Jennifer Tetzl and the journalist have left, speak for itself, but would have explained, emotively, Jake's feelings, something like this: 'He was furious, who on earth did she think she was...' and the story would have lost its impact, which comes from the fact that the reader *himself* makes this judgement.

Here I might add that when I make selection of my short stories there is a moral problem. For how much should one revise? In revising, I feel disloyal to myself, it feels like cheating to make corrections and improve-

ments on what one has written a long time ago. So, instead of correcting and editing, I tend to leave out stories that I don't feel are satisfactory for some reason or other.

As to 'Africa Emergent', I don't think it is a very good story, certainly not the best I can do. When I was collecting *Selected Stories* (later re-issued as a paperback as *No Place Like Selected Stories*) I was very much in doubt whether to include it or not. The problem with this story is that it is really two stories — and what is it about? Is it about the architect, or is it about the relationship between him and his black friend? Actually, it was intended as a story about one of the most terrible products of South African life, the distrust that has arisen, and has had to arise, in a state like South Africa. It was written in a state of fiery emotion. The writer and her situation didn't meet, because she wasn't equal to it. Style tailed...

It is true that in any group of opponents to the government one can never be sure that some of the members are not police spies, and the situation (as in the story) is becoming so absurd and perverted that the very fact that a person — and he may very well be a friend — is not in prison, puts him or her under suspicion: Is he or she a police spy? One can never be sure, and of course this places an enormous strain on all relationships. In order to give you an impression of the effects of this state of affairs I'll tell you about an incident from our writers' organization a short while ago.

In the organization — Southern African PEN in Johannesburg — which has both black and white members, we very often arrange poetry readings. Such readings are extremely popular at the moment, we are so to speak at the Yevtushenko stage! One reason for the popularity of this sort of arrangement is that there is a feeling that words which have only been spoken are not felt to be very dangerous, whereas the moment they have been written down they become much more politically incriminating. The quality of the poetry read out is not always very high, some of the poems are hardly more than slogans, but there is genuine feeling, real anger, real pride and determination to create a literature for the people.

One afternoon we had arranged a reading in a black township church. There were about 30 of us, 25 blacks and 4 or 5 whites. The following night, one of the black poets, a young man of less than 20, who had been one of the readers, was called upon by the police, taken to the station, and questioned all night about himself and other members of the organization.



When the rest of us got to know, it caused a great shock among the white members, and we got together in great agitation. Who is the informer? Who is a police spy? Who among us?

But the black members remained perfectly calm. I asked one how he could be so controlled, and got this answer, 'What about it? What can we do if it is found out who the informer is? Absolutely nothing. This is the way we live now.'

The informer was regarded as a victim of a system of repression, just like his victims. There is a feeling among many blacks that you have to accept the facts of the struggle. If you are not prepared or willing to live with danger like that, you can just as well lock yourself up immediately. The risk, the danger is taken so much for granted that incidents like the one I told you about don't surprise or anger any black.

Take the example of the police force. Among blacks there is a tremendous hatred of and antagonism against the white police which is only too natural. But the same hatred is not to be found against their black colleagues. Their work is the same, in fact most work done by the black police is action directed against their fellow blacks. Of course one can understand that blacks become policemen; they get a permanent job, a fixed salary, security. The white economy doesn't give blacks much choice on the matter of earning their bread.

*I would like to hear which contemporary writers you read and find interesting?*

I know that it is fashionable for writers to say that they don't but I readily admit that I read a lot of contemporary work. I think that Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier, García Márquez, Fuentes, Puig and of course Borges, form the most interesting group of writers today. Böll's *Group Portrait with Lady*, Grass's *The Flounder*, Michel Tournier, through whose crystal tower the winds of the world blow, Chinua Achebe...

*What about the English?*

I think their subject matter is incredibly narrow, most of them concentrate on more or less pathological states. Look at a writer like Iris Murdoch. She is an immensely talented writer, but so often, what is she doing but describing pathological states standing for metaphysical states?

Angus Wilson is a very fine writer, indeed, and of the youngest generation I think Ian McEwan is one of the most promising, not because of his novel *The Cement Garden*, which is mannered and contrived, but because of his short stories. I think he has many fine works in store. Graham Greene is unique — a questing lucidity that no other writer in the English language can come near. Why hasn't he got the Nobel Prize? We have all learned so much from him, as writers and readers.

*But most of the interesting news in English literature seems to come from the Commonwealth.*

I did not mention any of the so-called Commonwealth writers before. Do you call V. S. Naipaul an English writer? A 'Commonwealth' writer? I don't like Naipaul's *In a Free State* and *Guerrillas* very much. I feel he 'chose' the subjects, whereas with *A House For Mr Biswas* — a marvellous novel — and *A Bend in the River*, his subjects chose him. He expresses a whole consciousness that has not been expressed before. It's tremendously important.

Patrick White I admire greatly. I think he stands apart among present day writers — think of *A Fringe of Leaves* and *The Aunt's Story*. He has a fantastic ear for how people speak; nothing is more deadening than when — in a novel or play — all the characters talk alike. In White's work they never do.

Doris Lessing — always searching, always on her way to something new and different, what a range of intelligence, her every book a blow at artistic complacency. *The Golden Notebook* I consider her masterpiece.

The first part of *Children of Violence*, *Martha Quest*, has some very striking similarities with my first novel, *The Lying Days*, which I wrote at the same time. Not because we influenced each other — I don't suppose we'd heard of each other; the similarities had to arise — there was such a similarity of development and experience between us where and when we grew up. In another sense those early novels complement each other, I like the idea of a literary patchwork, novel by novel, poem by poem, by different writers, mapping out an era, 'a continent' more and more thoroughly. No one writer can do it.

I rank Achebe very highly, especially his *Arrow of God*, and I consider it a tragedy that he has had to live under such disturbed conditions and writes so little.

Among the Americans Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* gives me the strongest illumination of the American mystery. For my personal experience of the USA doesn't explain it to me at all...

Bellow (what a wonderful novel *Humboldt's Gift* is), Updike and Heller started very differently, but their own lives are octopuses taking up more and more space in their books: their divorces etc. Even Updike's *The Coup* which is set among blacks in Africa is a book about John Updike. Clever, crudite, elegant, yes — but just compare it with *A Bend in the River*. Naipaul doesn't use flashy symbolic characters to daggle but commands the profound skill to move deep into the end of colonial life through apparently marginal lives.

What Mailer and Capote etc. are doing now with their writing, in which they use factual material for their books, is in my opinion an unfortunate failure of the imagination: sensationalism in place of sensibility. Again, the morbid hankering after the spurious 'heightened reality' of the pathological personality.

Finally I would like to mention a writer from the American/European borderline, Paul Theroux, whose novel *The Family Arsenal* is one of the best about England of the last 10 or 15 years. Theroux has passed through a remarkable development: he is one of those writers who 'hear' what people are thinking about themselves, and he gives expression to what goes unrealized in their society in a way they can't do.



Nadine Gordimer

# Stephen Gray

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## HOTTENTOT VENUS

My name is Saartjie Baartman and I come from Kat Rivier  
they called me the Hottentot Venus  
they rang up the curtains on a classy peepshow two pennies  
two pennies in the slot and I'd wind up  
shift a fan and roll my rolypoly bum  
and rock the capitals of Europe into mirth  
I was a special voluptuary a squealing passion  
they had never seen anything like it before  
Little Sarah twenty six born on the vlei past Grahamstown  
bought for a song and a clap of the hands  
a speculative sketch come to life a curiosity  
of natural science weighed measured  
exported on show two pennies two pennies  
in the Gallery of Man I am unique  
I am lonely now I always was out here  
my deathbed a New Year's eve  
a salon couch girdled with reporters and I turned  
my complexion to the wall and dreamed  
of a knife cutting deep in a springbok's hide  
and they woke me with brandy for smelling salts  
and I wouldn't wake again in their august company  
my soul creeps under cairns where  
wayside travellers throw another stone in my memory  
two pennies two pennies dropped on my eyes  
they laid me in state in my crinoline robe  
my hands folded coyly as they always were  
and I let them bury my body so celebrated so sensational  
they could never do while I was alive  
what they wanted to do sink me in wax and decant my brain  
and put me in a case in the Museum of Man

I stare out at the Eiffel Tower my hands covering  
my vaginal flaps my own anomaly  
the kneebone connected to the thighbone connected to  
the hipbone connected to the spine and the skull  
they mounted me without beads or skins or quivers  
Saartjie Baartman is my name and I know  
my place I know my rights I put down my foot  
and the Tuilleries Gardens shake I put down  
my foot and the Seine changes course I put  
down my foot and the globe turns upside down  
I rattle my handful of bones and the dead arise.

Saartjie Baartman was bought in 1810 by an English dealer and exported from Caffraria to the fun fairs and circuses of Europe, as an exhibit, the first of many. Billed as the Hottentot Venus the diminutive Saartjie rocked the cartoonists of Britain with her steatopygous buttocks not into idle sympathy but into gross lampoons. In Paris her anomalous figure unchained a series not of love songs but of musical grotesqueries à la Hottentot. She died not of adulation but of alcoholic poisoning on New Year's Eve, 1816. One notes her ultimate debasement: instead of being accorded the rights of burial, like an animal she was destined to take her place in the Museum of Man. In the Palais du Chailiot where to this day her rigid skeleton and her decanted brain stare out at the Eiffel Tower, symbol of the age of steel and of progress which was to dispossess her people. This note is taken from Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: an Introduction*.



Saartjie Baartman in the Museum of Man in Paris

## Soyinka's *The Road* as Ritual Drama

There is evidence in Soyinka's poems that the theme of 'the road' has a personal significance. It is the Muse of the first section of *Idanre and other Poems* (1967) entitled 'Of the Road'. In the prefatory note to 'Death in the Dawn', Soyinka explains that he was inspired by a real event:

Driving to Lagos one morning a white cockerel flew out of the dusk and smashed itself against my windscreen. A mile further I came across a motor accident and a freshly dead man in the smash.<sup>1</sup>

The cock as a sacrificial offering for divination and propitiation is accessible enough here; but later in the poem, the lines

May you never walk  
When the road waits, famished

have only a superficial meaning for the reader who is unaware that Soyinka is saying that it is Ogun, the god of the road (in Yoruba cosmology) and not simply the road itself, that waits, famished. Ogun is hungry for food, whatever its form, whether humans slain by accident, or dogs (his favourite meat) deliberately killed by his taxi-driving devotees.<sup>2</sup> All these ideas are deeply explored by Soyinka in *The Road*. It is not accidental that Samson in this play is made to repeat word by word the same plea in 'May we never walk when the road waits, famished'.<sup>3</sup> This deliberate coincidence betrays Soyinka's fascination with the predatory quality of 'the road'. This beast of prey which lies in wait is a monstrous man-eater: an inescapable doom.

Soyinka's exhortation not to 'walk when the road waits,

famished' seems cold and remote. In any case, it is irrelevant because Man is a pilgrim who must travel:

Traveller, you must set out  
At dawn (*Idamu*, p. 10)

With cold impersonality Soyinka further tells us of the horror on the life-eating road:

We walked through broken braids of steel  
And fallen acrobats. The endless safety nets  
Of forests prove a green deception  
Fated lives ride on the wheels of death when,  
The road waits, famished (*Idamu*, p. 64)

By contrast, 'In Memory of Segun Awolowo' is a sign of the poet's sorrow as he laments his intimate friend. Here, Soyinka does not contemplate Death in the abstract. "The sting of personal loss prevents the possibility of looking with indifference on the strange arithmetics of Death: Death is not an abstraction, but a concrete foe"<sup>2</sup>:

The road, the aged road  
Retched on this fresh plunder  
Of my youth (*Idamu*, p. 14)

During the early sixties Soyinka was compelled to travel constantly on the dangerous road linking Lagos to Ibadan. On many occasions, he witnessed road fatalities and other accidents whose frequency caused him to fear for his own life. He accepted his duty, yet dreaded that the next turn on the road would be his last. This may explain why he was spell-bound by the road as an agent of death.

The 'personal relationship' which he developed with 'the road' can be understood in terms of this attraction to, and fear of, death. Putting his anguish and deep-rooted fear of death in verse form, Soyinka purged the terror resulting from death's embrace. But in so doing, he pays a tribute to 'the road' with all its religious and ritualistic connotations. 'The road' is an 'asphalt god' whose



favours the poet propitiates. This literary deification of 'the road' is a typical innovation of Soyinka. It finds its deepest expression in his third long play *The Road*.

I have tried so far to indicate the significance of 'the road' in Soyinka's private life. The playwright himself says in a magazine interview that

*The Road* is based on what I might call a personal intimacy which I have developed with a certain aspect of the road . . . It concerns the reality of death. It is a very strange personal experience which developed out of my travels on the road. It was almost a kind of exorcism writing that play.<sup>3</sup>

This offers an insight into the sources of the play and the real meaning of 'the road'. *The Road* centres on the reality of Death. It is on this allegorical level its significance must be understood.

The realistic title of the play can be misleading if we take it at its face value. The play is deeply rooted in Soyinka's Yoruba culture. The many references to Yoruba concepts and realities in *The Road* are evidence that a knowledge of Yoruba traditions is necessary to understand the full meaning of the play. Soyinka's literary output is an exposition of a specific worldview which originates from his African background, his sound knowledge of other cultures (Asian and European in particular), and his own research into Yoruba cosmology. He has selected in his native culture a few central tenets which he exploits extensively in his works. And conversely, he tries to reinterpret the entire Yoruba vision of the world in terms of these central tenets. Besides his own theory known as 'The Fourth Stage', Soyinka has explored two particular beliefs in *The Road*: the 'Abiku' concept and the 'Ogun' myth.

The 'Abiku' concept originates in the traditional African belief of 'the wanderer child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother'. It is incarnated by Half Child in *A Dance of the Forests*. Half Child is a strange baby who is no sooner born than all it desires is to die and be born again:

I who await a mother  
Feel this dread,

Feel this dread,  
I who flee from womb  
To branded womb, cry it now  
I'll be born dead  
I'll be born dead<sup>6</sup>

The Half Child is a symbol of the wish for death and the failure of hope.<sup>7</sup> In *Idanre*, the 'Abiku' figure appears in two poems: in 'Abiku' and in 'Season'. As its name indicates, the poem 'Abiku' is dedicated to this ageless child who scorns all sacrifices and rituals:

In vain your bangles cast  
Charmed circles at my feet  
I am Abiku, calling for the first  
And repeated time (*Idanre*, p. 28)

The idea that life is a cyclic reincarnation is central to the 'Abiku' poem. A belief in the cyclic nature of creation predominates in the African traditional worldview. I do not suggest that this is peculiar to the African conception of the world: parallel beliefs are found in other cultures. The Asian belief in Dharma and Karma (cosmic ordering) as well as the belief in the transrational in some Western mystic societies, testify to its universality. Many Western writers and thinkers have explored this notion of the cyclic reincarnation: Nietzsche's famous analysis of the 'Recurring Cycle' is one example.

The 'Abiku' is the Yoruba version of this universal belief according to which death is not the end of life. Communication with the beyond is feasible because life and death are two facets of the same cosmic reality. In the context of this time-structure, the periodicity of the existences of the dead, the living and the unborn is a basic principle. In other words, the worlds of the ancestors, the living and the stillborns are neither uni-directional (chronologically-speaking), nor are they separated by impervious walls. Instead, there is a link between these different worlds which are believed to coexist permanently.

The cyclic process of life and future reincarnation (central

tenets of Soyinka's Yoruba cosmology) are illustrated by two examples from *The Road*. It is in terms of Abiku's flouting the traditional struggle to preserve life that Professor describes the riverside where the accident has taken place:

Below that bridge, a black rise of buttocks,  
two unyielding thighs and that red trickle  
like a woman washing her monthly pain in a  
thin river. *So many lives rush in and out*  
between her legs, and most of it a waste (*The Road*, p. 197 – my italics)

Earlier in this scene, Kotonu asserts that the lorry which overtook them at the bridge was full of faceless passengers (virtually dead bodies). But Professor records this testimony in his own enigmatic words. His insistence that the lorry was 'pregnant with stillborns' stresses the traditional belief that those who are dead will be born again. This idea that life is an eternal repetition is also basic to the poem 'Season'. The line 'The ripest fruit was saddest' which appears in it is a restatement of the notion that life, at its fullest, is closest to death.

Soyinka does not treat the 'Abiku' theme as a separate entity. He deeply explores the paradoxical idea which has it that life is in death and death is in life. The very choice of the road as the setting in which his characters evolve and the constant promiscuity of death, recall Soyinka's own experience as I mentioned previously in this essay. Similarly, *The Road* is permeated with the consciousness that life is always on the brink of death and death is on the brink of life. Professor, the main character whose constant groping towards the essence of death is central to the play, sleeps in the nearby graveyard, 'among the dead'. The drivers' praise song emphasizes Professor's position between the living and the dead:

Professor, our being like demon  
Professor, our being like demon  
The elder above us  
The elder below us  
The hand that thinks to smash me, let it  
pause awhile

I have one behind me, coiled snake on Myseries  
He moults in season, coiled snake on Myseries (*The Road*, p. 231)

This praise song leads us to the myth of Ogun. It is exactly in these terms that 'the wanderer child' in the poem 'Abiku' boasts that it will return as 'the suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep' and that its mother's will be 'the killing cry'. There is a reference to this tail-devouring snake in the poem 'Idanre'. We later find it again in Soyinka's collection of essays, *Myth, Literature and the African World* as the 'Möbius Strip'. This symbol is an insignia for Ogun who wears a decoration round his neck as a symbol of the doom of eternal repetition. At this point, the 'Abiku' figure (cyclic reincarnation) completely fuses with the Ogun divinity (doom of eternal repetition).

As the myth of Ogun is central to *The Road*, it is necessary to recount Soyinka's Yoruba cosmogony as explained in *Myth, Literature and the African World*. The Yoruba myth of origin has it that the realm of infinity was the natural home of the unseen deities, the resting place for the departed and a staging house for the unborn. This is, in Soyinka's terminology, the 'chthonic realm' or the storehouse for the creative and destructive essences.

In ritual drama (that is in drama as a cleansing, binding, communal recreative force), this realm was periodically breached by a human representative for the well-being of the community. In other words, the Yoruba (like the Asians and the Europeans before the advent of cosmic Manicheism) existed within a cosmic totality. His own earth being, his 'gravity-bound apprehension of self' was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon. In this traditional world vision, the cosmos did not have the 'grandeur' of the infinite which Pascal proclaims in *Les Pensées*. But the tangible and the immediate were part of its attributes. As a result, it was possible for Man, through vicarious experiences, to reach an understanding of or to come to term with, the world around him.

Yoruba cosmogonic wisdom is embodied in the proverb: 'Bi o s'emi, imale o si' (if humanity were not, the gods would not be).<sup>11</sup> This is the best expression of the humanness that characterizes the relationship of the Yoruba with the Ifa Pantheon. Also specific to

all Yoruba deities is that even when they bear the essence of purity, their history is always marked by some act of excess (hubris) or other kind of human weaknesses. Sango, the god of lightning and punitive justice, is depicted as weak, treacherous and disloyal. Obatala, the essence of quietude and forbearance, the god of soul purity, had a conspicuous weakness for drink (palm wine). The act of 'hubris' leads to a disruption of the balance within nature. Complementarity between man and god is lost. Some kind of penance is exacted from the god responsible for this disruption of the cosmic ordering. The gods are brought within the cycle and continuity of cosmic regulation involving the worlds of the ancestors, the living and the unborn. These are referred to by Soyinka as the rites of passage which ensure the constant regenerative process of the universe.

Ogun's history, as it appears in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, is a fascinating story of the completion of Yoruba cosmogony. He is the first god of the Ifa Pantheon to have travelled through the 'chthonic realm' (the primordial marsh or abyss). It was the gods who came to men, anguished by a continuing sense of incompleteness, needing to recover their long-lost essence of totality. They were led by Ogun, the combative hunter who had visited earth before and knew how to smelt iron ore and forge technical instruments. His action united gods and men and inaugurated the harmonious Yoruba world in which gods and men live side by side. This aspect of Ogun as the first darter and explorer is what Soyinka regards as central to the Yoruba concept of drama.

Ogun is equally known as the 'protector of orphans', the 'roof over the homeless' and the 'terrible guardian of the sacred oath': he stands for humane but rigidly restorative justice. Being the first explorer, Ogun is regarded as the god of creativity (associated with the harvest season and the rains). But paradoxically, because of his metal weaponry, he is also the god of death and war.

This dual nature of Ogun, as the embodiment of the creative-destructive essence, has not been retained by Soyinka in *The Road*. Only the violent and destructive aspect of his nature are deeply explored in the play. It is in his quality of the reluctant leader of

men (in 'Idanre') and of the scrap-iron dealer (in 'In Memory of Segun Awolowo') that Ogun presides over the hideous car smashes in *The Road*. He greedily slaughters animals (preferably dogs) and people alike. He is a demanding god and the roads provide abundant meat for his diet. Samson implores the driver of 'No Danger No Delay':

Kill us a dog Kotonu, kill us a dog.  
Kill us a dog before *the hungry god*  
*lies in wait and makes a substitute*  
of me (*Idanre*, p. 198)

The lorry drivers are Ogun's devotees and they propitiate his favours by constantly killing dogs for him. Ogun lives on death and needs feeding regularly. The Driver's Festival is his festival and its origins go back to the god's rite of passage (a re-enactment of Ogun's venture). In *The Road*, Soyinka uses this Festival with tremendous dramatic effect: Ogun is the patron god of the drivers and the heart of this play's meaning lies in an event which took place at the last drivers' festival.

Deriving from the myth of Ogun is the fourth area of existence which Soyinka calls 'The Fourth Stage'. This is the dark continuum of transition where the inter-transmutation of essence-ideal and materiality occurs (*MLAW*, p. 26). This middle ground (a sort of no-man's land) belonging neither to the world of the flesh nor the spirit, is where Soyinka has set the meaning of *The Road*. He propounds that Ogun's venture through the primordial chaos succeeded thanks to his wilful nature which rescued him from the 'precarious edges of total dissolution' (being torn asunder by cosmic winds) (*MLAW*, p. 30). This, in the playwright's vision, is the unique essentiality of Ogun in Yoruba metaphysics: as the embodiment of the social, communal will invested in a protagonist of his choice.

In *The Road*, the concept of the state of possession by the spirit of the mask is minutely explored in both religious and psychological terms. The actor in ritual drama prepares mentally and physically for his disintegration and re-assembly within the universal womb of origin; he experiences the transitional, yet inchoate ma-

trix of death and being. Such an actor in the role of the protagonist becomes the unresisting mouthpiece of the god (MLAW, p. 30). The opening lines of the 'Alagemo' poem help to indicate that this passage between death, freshly dissolution and arrival in the other world is the area which Soyinka explores in *The Road*: 'My roots have come out in the other world'. We expect and find a steady sinking down towards the other world, visually represented by the Egungun mask that spins and falls when Professor finally meets death in the closing scene.<sup>8</sup> Professor wants total knowledge of death (by holding the god in Murano 'captive') and without dying himself: 'I cannot yet believe that death's revelation is total, or not at all'. It is in these terms that he expresses his faith that his quest will be successful. 'The Word' he has been seeking all along is 'the essence of death'. 'The road' in this context symbolizes the proverbial road of life through which all mortals must travel. But Murano cannot yield the secret of 'The Word': he is in a transitional state and although closest to the spirit world (he has one foot in each world and is actually dying or gradually sinking towards complete dissolution), his knowledge of 'The Word' is incomplete and inexpressable: 'The Word may be found companion not to life, but to Death'. One cannot gain the forbidden knowledge and stay alive.

Soyinka's vision of art is mythically-based. His conception of drama, in particular, is revealed in *Myth, Literature and the African World* in the following terms:

Ritual theatre . . . aims to reflect through physical and symbolic means the archetypal struggle of the mortal being against exterior forces. . . , even the so-called realistic or literary drama can be interpreted as a mundane reflection of this essential struggle. Poetic drama especially may be regarded as a repository of this essential aspect of theatre, being largely metaphorical, it expands the immediate meaning and action of the protagonists into a world of nature forces and metaphysical conceptions. (MLAW, p. 43)

Here is a clear expression of what Soyinka has achieved in *The Road*. The existence of a gulf (abyss) to be bridged is crucial to the Yoruba cosmic ordering. The gulf is what must be diminished by

sacrifices, rituals, ceremonies of appeasement to the cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf (MLAW, p. 31). Drama is therefore an assertive link with a lost sense of origin. This helps to explain why Soyinka's themes are often infused with Yoruba mythology and religious sentiment. Soyinka does not put so much emphasis on social details. His interest in fantasy, myth and universal issues is conspicuous in almost all his works. There is, unmistakably, an underlying social indictment in *The Road* as the play gives a picture of some aspects of contemporary Nigeria (the police, the civil service) as being thoroughly corrupt. But more often than not, Soyinka works within a traditional system which allows him to explore the problems of creation and existence from a philosophical and mythic perspective. With him there is no problem of nostalgia, of melancholy recollection of a dying world and no problem of authenticity. He is imaginatively engaged with a tradition that still happens to be alive.<sup>10</sup>

The 'Egungun' cult which is alluded to in *The Road* is the special custodian of the ancestral spirits. These spirits, together with the indwelling spirits of the inanimate world are like the Yoruba gods. They are believed to possess enormous power and they must be treated in the proper ritualistic manner. Say Tokyo's injunction that 'you gorra do it proper' originates from the traditional belief in the disastrous consequence which attends the non-observance of proper ritual.<sup>11</sup> Having failed to observe this rule, Professor ultimately meets death in the closing scene.

When the wearer of an 'Egungun' mask experiences possession, he performs the ritual dance with perfect skill. The dance is 'the movement of transition' as we learn from the 'Alagemo' poem. Both the dance and the mask are tangible means of connection with the other world. The spirit of the dancing mask is held in a hiatus while the ancestral spirit (or the spirit of a god) takes over. The dancing mask is in a continuous communion with the other world and this helps to explain Professor's interest in Murano who functions as Ogun's mouthpiece and might yield 'The Word'. The drums and the dirges stylistically underline the meaning and heighten the dominant emotion. Soyinka's use of masks and drums and his inclusion of dirges serve to make *The Road* an



elaborate dance of death.

I have pointed out earlier in this essay that the writing of Soyinka is an allegorization and that one should always look for a deeper level of significance. Soyinka constantly thinks in terms of Yoruba myths. The presence of the ancestors ('Egungun') and of the Yoruba gods ('Ogun') is sacramental in *The Road*. Sometimes Western mythology is brought in (the mystical function of palm wine recalls the rite of communion), betraying Soyinka's biculturalism.

Soyinka's characters invariably exemplify the particular Yoruba religious view. One such example is Say Tokyo Kid. In the true tradition of a Chicago gangster, he is addicted to hemp and sells his services for any kind of dirty work. He nevertheless shares basic Yoruba beliefs: he feels that the only reason why he has not yet been in an accident is because he understands and treats the spirit within the timber properly. We recognize here the traditional Yoruba belief that none of the external world is essentially inanimate. This fearful reverence makes Say Tokyo an instrument of the gods.<sup>12</sup>

Because he has chosen to explore the arrest of time, Soyinka works with modernist techniques. This movement back and forth in time together with the lack of focus is found in the avant-garde theatre. Like the dramatists of the absurd, Soyinka prefers to articulate an ethical no-man's land. The clowning and the paronomasiac dialogue belong to this genre.<sup>13</sup> As a result, there are constant flash-backs and shifts and the narrative seemingly has no logical sequence. The characters speak different levels of language (Yoruba-Pidgin-English). Although Professor's English is perfect, his meaning remains inaccessible (his words being broken down and incoherent). *The Road* is Soyinka's most modern and mature work fusing the mental and the physical into one cathartic movement.

## NOTES

1. Wole Soyinka, *Identities and Other Poems* (Methuen, London, 1967), p. 10. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Adrian Roscoe, *Mother Is Gold* (Cambridge U. P., 1962), p. 53.

3. Wole Soyinka, *The Road in Collected Plays I* (O. U. P., London, 1973), p. 199. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
4. Francis Katamba, 'Death and Man in the Earlier Works of Wole Soyinka' in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. IX, No 3, April 1975, p. 65.
5. Rex Colling, 'Wole Soyinka: A Personal View' in *The New Statesman* 76, 20 December 1968, p. 879. The italics are mine.
6. Wole Soyinka, *A Dance of the Forests* in *Collected Plays I* (O. U. P., 1973), p. 64.
7. James Gibbs, 'The Origins of *A Dance of the Forests*' in *African Literature Today* No 8 (Heinemann, 1976), p. 67.
8. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge U. P.), p. 10. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text with title abbreviated to MLAW.
9. Adrian Roscoe, *Mother is Gold*, p. 229.
10. Adrian Roscoe, *Mother is Gold*, p. 51.
11. Margaret Laurence, *Long Dreams and Canons* (Macmillan, London, 1968), p. 51.
12. Margaret Laurence, *ibid.*, p. 51.
13. Annemarie Heywood, 'The Fox's Dance: The Staging of Soyinka's Plays' in *African Literature Today* No 8, *ibid.*, p. 43.

# Jayanta Mahapatra

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## THE THIRTEENTH YEAR OF MY DAUGHTER

A little longing  
like a piece of disturbed sleep back of her mind  
scurrying away the echoes of the startled bees

Now she chases a butterfly  
when the whole of her secret sleep spills  
the waiting tender voices into the season's honey

## BEYOND THE HIMALAYAN RANGES

When darkness falls the stones come closer  
toward us, both the written and the unwritten,  
and our hearts are thin, with nothing behind,  
like facades intact in a movie set  
that sway with only blue sky on either side.

Darkness that comes, revealing nothing else;  
coming through the clenched landscapes of China  
and through the frozen perimeters of Siberian stone,  
flying unnoticed with millions of migratory birds  
with the shadows of sheathed atoms in their beaks.

Darkness whose meaning escapes our children:  
of the leper's mutilated limb that becomes gesture,  
of ideology whose words are redeemers of the flesh.  
Somewhere, beyond the high Himalayan ranges,  
a lost man wears his like a sleep  
which goes far down the mind where the red stones stand.  
There is no movement in the sky; it is blank  
as his face. Only the unseen wings in the air  
keep dragging their shadows like nets on the snow.

NORMAN TALBOT

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## The Third Labour

And a third time I was taken into a dream, and again the woman's face  
in the water laughed at me, my farmers' boy boots, my sullen accent. I  
put up with the laughter.

She told me again to look into the pool, and this time it seemed to

become a map. I didn't understand the map; it was made of many colours sparsely and formally lined and patterned, like a Navajo sand painting. She told me to look for the land called Emteil Coverts, but no part of the map seemed at all like a part of a landscape. Then she said that I must gather the honey of the wild bees that lived there, and feed the Sleepers with it. I saw the faces, the bloodless lips of the Sleepers, again, in the water and superimposed on the map, and again I was one of them. Then I understood the map, and I saw that there was no road to Emteil Coverts that did not lead through a red desert land called Coverleyt. On the map there were little white knots or patterns of rope all about the borders of Coverleyt, and I understood from this that although this was hot and featureless and most barren, yet it had defenders, who would be implacable in defiance of anyone who entered it.

Once I understood this I was walking a flinty little road down towards the russet sand of Coverleyt. The sudden edge of that desert was a deeper, purplestained loose sand. The low hills of Emteil Covert lay bluish across the silver eastern sky.

As I stepped onto the sand it shivered, and the shiver ran rapidly away under the sand. It was blazing midday, and speeding from right and left came several tall lancers, riding huge yellowish desert mice. The mice leapt across the dunes and light splintered under their feet in the spurts of sand-grains. Every time they landed, their long hind feet made a booming noise like summer thunder. The Coverleytish warriors wore white robes, and their white-painted faces were set in masks of despair, or some mockery of despair, like cruel mimes or misanthropic clowns. Their long thin lances were tipped with bone, and they shook them towards me, telling me to go back.

I said, 'I am dreaming, I am dreaming you, so your weapons can't hurt me.' This was, it seems, incorrect, because the lances hurt intensely, but in a few strides I was beyond the whole country of Coverleyt, among the low furze of the hills of Emteil Covert. The air was full of flower-scents and the fluctuating drones and whines of dusty-coloured bees. The bushes, you see, had clusters of pale yellow flowers all over them (not a hairy sandy yellow, like the mice, but a soft whiter yellow). The white clover between the bushes shook pollen over my boots at every step. Later on, the valleys became a little deeper and steeper. This is where the emteil grew, twisted greyish trees like olives, but with thick tassels of yellow flowers like laburnum. The emteil were alive with sharp-beaked little birds that kept leaping out into the air, swerving, and hovering to catch bees on the wing. Unlike the bees, the birds were fairly quiet, their

songs almost whispered down into emteit branches. The bees struggled, heavy with nectar and pollen, from flower to flower, but I wasn't able to catch even one. Soon they seemed to give up their collecting. The flowers waited for the evening moths. The bees murmured back through the cool sweet-smelling evening to their mud nests under the eaves of the town.

The biggest building in the little town was the theatre, though it was built of mud bricks too. The bees' nests were thicker there, inside and out. No wonder it was called the Bee Tower. I dared not tell anyone what I was there for (though the townspeople looked sleepy enough, I knew they wouldn't let me take honey) so I pretended I wanted to see the play. The play had only one actor, a huge, sad, cumbrous whiteface clown. He entered spectacularly, by falling in and out down the rungs of a huge ladder at stage centre. The plot was without interest, but his slow and pathetic mime brought sobs of sympathy and admiration from the audience. He peopled his stage with human incompetence, cynicism and bewilderment wonderfully, I had to admit. At the climax he took on the hesitant droning and erratic wing movements of a dying bee, so realistically that scores of bees woke up and swarmed above the stage in great concern. He died. So to speak.

Then he leapt to his feet and shook a small bell to signal the end of the performance, laughing in delight at the delight of the audience; everyone was laughing, weeping, tossing flowers. Then as the applause died down, a single bee, white or mealy in colour, was seen over the actor's head, flying slowly round him. He looked up, and the bee let fall a single drop of amber honey into his laughing mouth. He fell dead.

No one was surprised. This must be the way these performances always ended. No one noticed, either, when I lifted his loose, untidy body from the stage and carried it out among the press of stirred and chattering theatre-goers in the doorways. At first I went by the stars, but soon they were hard to see because of the clouds of bees that filled the night above me. They left his body alone when I held it across my shoulders, but when I held it out in front of me on my arms they seemed to think I was offering it. They began to settle on it in great numbers. I felt my burden getting lighter as I jiggled down the slopes towards the red desert.

By the time I got to the Sleepers in the pool there were only six sweet, sticky amber objects, like statues of bones in honey, amid all the ecstatic, dead or semi-conscious bees. Still, I slipped each carefully into the water above a sleeping face. One was a head, another a spine; the others, who knows? Perhaps bones from upper arms and legs? I was pretty sure the Sleeper who ended up without one would be me. The pool laughed.

## The Boeotian Strain

In his collection *Living in a Calm Country*, published in 1975, Peter Porter has a poem which I propose to read to you today as the basis of my talk. This poem would have been written sometime in 1974, and interestingly, at about the same time, I was writing a poem on a similar theme, and containing the same key concept, that of the Boeotian strain in Australian culture. What occurred was a sort of coincidental and unwitting literary conversation between Peter and myself. This is a surprisingly common phenomenon; things that are in the air are frequently picked up by more than one mind at around the same time. Edison and Swan inventing the electric light almost simultaneously in America and England is just one of a host of examples. I should also mention that this talk is an expanded version of an essay I wrote and which will be appearing in *Australian Poems in Perspective*, edited by Peter Elkin, to be published soon by the University of Queensland Press. At the end of the talk, I will read you my own poem on the Boeotian strain, to illustrate the dialogue we were unwittingly having at opposite ends of the earth. Peter's poem analyses the matter, while mine celebrates it. But here is Peter's poem:

### ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HESIOD

For Sp at a village fête I bought  
Old Homer-Lucan who popped Keats's eyes,  
Print smaller than the Book of Common Prayer  
But Swinburne at the front, whose judgement is  
Always immaculate. I'll never read a tenth  
Of it in what life I have left to me

But I did look at *The Georgics*, as he calls  
The *Weeks and Days*, and there I saw, not quite  
The view from Darien but something strange  
And balking – Australia, my own country  
And its edgy managers – in the picture of  
Euboean husbandry, terse family feuds  
And the minds of gods tangential to the earth.

Like a Taree smallholder splitting logs  
And philosophizing on his dangling billies,  
The poet mixes hard agrarian instances  
With sour sucks to his brother, Chapman, too,  
That perpetual motion poetry machine,  
Grinds up the classics like bone meal from  
The abattoirs. And the same blunt patriotism,  
A long-winded, emphatic, kelpie yapping  
About our land, our time, our fate, our strange  
And singular way of moons and flowers, lakes  
Filling oddly – yes, Australians are Boeotians,  
Hard as headlands, and, to be fair, with days  
As robust as the Scythian wind on stone.

To teach your grandmother to suck eggs  
Is a textbook possibility in New South Wales  
Or outside Asara. And such a genealogy too!  
The Age of Iron is here, but oh the memories  
Of Gold – pioneers preaching to the stringybarks,  
Boring the land to death with verses and with  
Mental Homes. ‘Care-flying east’ and ‘Gift-  
devouring kings’ become the Sonata of the Shotgun  
And Europe’s Entropy; for ‘the axle-tree, the quern,  
The hard, fair-fostered man’ you choose among  
The hand castrator, kerosene in honey tins  
And mystic cattlemen: the Land of City States  
Greets Australia in a farmer’s gods.

Hesiod’s father, caught in a miserable village,  
Not helped by magic names like Helicon,  
Sailed to improve his fortunes, and so did  
All our fathers – in turn, their descendants

Lacked initiative, other than the doctors' daughters  
Who tripped to England. Rough-nosed Hesiod  
Was sure of his property to a slip-rail –  
Had there been grants, he'd have farmed all  
Summer and spent winter in Corinth  
At the Creative Writing Class. Chapman, too,  
Would vie with Steiner for the Pentecostal  
Silver Tongue. Some of us feel at home nowhere,  
Others in one generation luse with the land.

I salute him then, the blunt old Greek whose way  
Of life was as cunning as organic. His poet  
Followers still make me feel *déraciné*  
Within myself. One day they're on the campus,  
The next in wide hats at a branding or  
Sheep drenching, not actually performing  
But looking the part and getting instances  
For odes that bruise the blood. And history,  
So interior a science it almost seems  
Like true religion – who would have thought  
Australia was the point of all that craft  
Of politics in Europe? The apogee, it seems,  
Is where your audience and its aspirations are.

'The colt, and mule, and horn-retorted steer' –  
A good iambic line to paraphrase:  
Long storms have blanched the million bones  
Of the Aegean, and as many hurricanes  
Will abrade the headstones of my native land:  
Sparrows acclimatize but I still seek  
The permanently upright city where  
Speech is nature and plants conceive in pots,  
Where one escapes from what one is and who  
One was, where home is just a postmark  
And country wisdom clings to calendars,  
The opposite of a sunburned truth-teller's  
World, haunted by precepts and the *Pleiades*.

Now, this is perhaps too dense a poem to read aloud effectively, because so many of its references on the page need to be looked at, savoured and considered before they yield their full flavour. It is



what I call a page-poem, rather than one adapted to reading aloud, but apart from maybe projecting it on a screen, that was about the only way I had of presenting it to you.

Hesiod's dates are not precisely known, but some time in the eighth century before Christ, so the tradition goes, a youth of that name, son of an immigrant farmer from the Greek colonies in Asia Minor, was guarding his father's flocks on the side of the sacred mountain Helikon, in rural Boeotia. The mountain had probably been a holy place since long before the Acolian Greeks trekked down from the north with their shaggy cattle and their Indo-European sky gods. Perhaps the most potent magical site on the mountain was the spring named Hippokrene, the Horse's Fountain, supposed to have been set flowing by a touch of Pegasus' hoof, but probably a ritual spot long before the flying horse and his heroic Greek rider were heard of. It may have been a mother-goddess site; springs with names alluding to a horseshoe or hoof often are. This would explain the compensating presence nearby of an altar dedicated to the father god Zeus. Somewhere near this altar and spring, that is to say, in a place where the two religious principles were in balance, the young Hesiod had a vision in which the Muses, immortal maidens begotten by Zeus upon Memory, gave him a staff of flowering laurel, breathed a 'godly voice' into him and commanded him to make poems.

Real or metaphorical – and many poets have had similar visionary inductions into their craft – the experience led to the creation of two long poem cycles, the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*. These poems are second only to the two great Homeric epics in the number of progeny they have generated and the cultural influence they have had. The *Theogony* is the source of much of our knowledge of Greek religion and this alone makes it one of the great historic resources of the Western mind, a sublime marble quarry of imagery and myth for well over two thousand years. The *Works and Days*, in turn, stands at the beginning of a long literary succession, coming down through Theocritus and Virgil and the high vernacular poetry of the Middle Ages to Wordsworth and Frost and a hundred more in modern times; most recently, in

Australia, it surfaces in David Campbell's own *Works and Days* and Geoffrey Lehmann's *Ross' Poems*.

Hesiod was the earliest poet in Western literature to write in the first person about his own concerns – this was not the dramatic first person of reported speech. He was also the originator of many themes, notably that of the successive Ages of Man, the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Iron Age and so on. He was the first poet to praise the heroism and dignity of labour, as distinct from war. In these two latter themes alone, he can perhaps be seen as the ultimate and most ancient progenitor of socialism. In a much wider sense, the works of Hesiod stand on one side of a rift that runs through the whole of Western culture, a fundamental tension that for convenience we may call the war between Athens and Boeotia. Peter Porter's superb poem is concerned with this rift at once on a cultural level and on a personal level.

What is at issue are two contrasting models of civilization between which Western man has vacillated; he has now drawn the rest of mankind into the quarrel and resolving this tension may be the most urgent task facing the world in modern times. In the past, Athens, the urbanizing, fashion-conscious principle removed from and usually insensitive to natural, cyclic views of the world, has won out time and again, though the successes of Boeotia have been far from negligible. Now, there are senses in which we may say that the old perennial struggle is coming to a head, with Australia finding herself, very much to her surprise, to be one of the places in which some sort of synthesis might at last be achieved. If this is to happen here, though, we will need to clear our heads of many remnant colonial obeisances and look at things clearly and straight. Let us start by looking at the origins of the struggle, in their artistic dimension.

From the time of its rise in the sixth century B.C., urban-minded, slave-holding Athens was always scornful of rural, traditional-minded, predominantly smallholding Boeotia. The Boeotians, living to the north-west of Attica, were held to be rude, boorish and stupid, their country swampy and cheerless, their arts

old-fashioned and tedious. The conflict went deeper than mere rivalry between Aeolian and Ionian Greeks; Athens and Thebes, the chief city of Boeotia, were competitors and occasionally enemies. Even the great Boeotian poet Pindar, honoured all over the Greek-speaking world for his eulogies of victors in the Pythian and Olympic Games, fell foul of this enmity. When he wrote his famous lines in praise of Athens:

O thou shining, violet-crowned, most-worthy-of-song  
bulwark of Hellas, glorious Athens, city of the gods,

his own city-state of Thebes imposed a fine on him.

Above and beyond its artistic dimension, the rivalry may have threatened Athens more seriously than we now realize. The vehemence of Athenian scorn at least is suggestive. Later, Athenian dominance as an educational and cultural centre, particularly during Roman times, may have caused the disappearance of works that might otherwise have revealed a more brilliant Boeotian tradition than that which we can now trace. There is evidence that a specifically Boeotian style of poetry, called by that name, may have existed in Homeric times and later. Some elements in the *Iliad*, especially, may be Boeotian. The famous catalogue of ships is a case in point. The catalogue seems to be a typically Boeotian device. Athenians *count*, we may say, while Boeotians *list* and *name*. The distinction makes for a profound difference in cultures that follow one model or the other. Similarly, the description of the shield of Achilles may be a Boeotian element in the *Iliad*, and if it is, that too is significant, as this description is the earliest piece of artistic criticism extant.

For all the scorn heaped on Boeotia by progressive Athens, two of the three greatest and most influential poets of classical Greece came from there: both Hesiod and Pindar were Boeotians, as was the woman poet Corinna. The third great name, of course, is that of Homer, who may not have been one person at all. After Boeotia, we would have to look to Alexandria for a comparable cradle of poets and poetic modes. By contrast, the only great

Athenian poets were dramatists. Athens' glory lay in her drama, her philosophers and her political theorists. All of these are urban and, in our expanded sense, typically 'Athenian' pursuits. Boeotia, in her perennial incarnations, replaces theatre with dance or pageant – or sport; philosophy she subordinates to religion and precept, and in politics, she habitually prefers *daïmos* to *demas*. Mistrustful of Athens' vaunted democracy – which, after all, involved only a minority of voters living on the labour of a large slave population – she clings to older ideas of the importance of family and the display of individual human quality under stress. If aristocracy is her besetting vice, that of Athens is probably abstraction. Each has its price, artistically, and it may be that poetry, of all but the dramatic sort, is ultimately a Boeotian art. It often has that appearance, when seen against our modern, increasingly Platonist metropolis. Drama, on the other hand, seems to be an almost wholly Athenian art. Conflict and resolution take the place, in a crowded urban milieu, of the Boeotian interest in celebration and commemoration, modes that perennially appear in spacious, dignified cultures.

Again, if aristocracy is a besetting vice of Boeotian culture, at least in the broadest sense – and we should remember that the purest Boeotian art we possess, the Hesiodic poems, does not arise from an aristocratic milieu, but rather from a world of small landowners – the parallel vice of Atheno-Alexandrian art is elitism. We have been mesmerized during the last few centuries by evolutionary ideas that contrast 'primitive' with advanced, progressive with stagnant, dynamic with decadent – the basic metaphor has been stretched many ways. It has taken the Second World War and the decolonization after that of much of the world to reveal the iniquities perpetrated by Western cultures, using these sorts of ideas as their cover and justification, on traditional cultures. We are beginning to be conscious of a nexus of thinking and of oppression here that extends all the way from personal to international relations and goes far beyond the bounds of art. In terms of our polarity, Athens has recently oppressed Boeotia on a

world scale and has caused the creation all over the world of more or less Westernized native elites, which often enthusiastically continue the oppression – China is one of the few nations in which this tendency has been successfully resisted. Elsewhere, Athens has once again overborne Bocotia on the same old basis as that used in Classical times and has once again made herself the ally and preceptress of Rome, that is to say, of imperialist force.

Within Western culture itself, it is possible that not only the oppressive use of contrasts such as *modern* versus *old-fashioned* or *cultivated* versus *rude*, but even the very notion of such polarities may ultimately derive from the submerged and almost forgotten conflict between Athens and Bocotia in early Classical times. Again, the ultimate coercive success of the Athenian model may be said to have been confirmed and greatly strengthened by Rome. We may say, altering the adage, that when Rome conquered Greece, she was herself conquered not by Greece but by Athens. Always, predominantly, Rome accepted Athenian and Alexandrian biases and standards and added themes of her own to them. The contrast between *metropolitan* and *provincial* is a case in point; this was only an implicit element in the older, decentralized Greek culture. It was only with the conquest of that world by Alexander the Great and the establishment of so-called Hellenistic civilization in the East that coterie art became the norm, with Kallimachos of Alexandria writing 'I hate everything public'. Horace's *Odi profanum vulgus* has its origin here. Rome also greatly narrowed the field of 'high' culture and continued that removal of high art out of the purview of the great mass of the people which has been a recurrent curse in subsequent Western cultures. In Classical Greece, art was a matter of public performance and concern; since Roman times, it has persistently tended to become a luxury product, a matter for coteries and high society. The disappearance of the older Plautine tradition of popular drama and the relegation of the popular audience to the circus and the racetrack is a case in point. Rome is the great exaggerator of Hellenic tendencies; she is Athens without proportion.

Before Ausonius, almost the single notable exception to what we have been saying is Virgil, who worked his way, as it were, backwards through Arcadian art – an Athenian style evolved to deal with Boeotian material in an emasculated way – in his Theocritean *Eclogues* to the pure Boeotian mode of his *Georgics* and thence to the epic. This is a fruitful path, which has been followed many times since. Present-day conservationists and urban drop-outs often follow it, turning to the country for romantic, basically Arcadian reasons and discovering harder Boeotian truths there. The distinction between the Boeotian and the idyllic Arcadian pastoral strands in our tradition might be the subject of another complete lecture – for now, I would only point to the relative artificiality of the Theocritean idyll as compared with the *Works and Days*. A similar comparison might be made between, say, Milton's *Lycidas* and Langland's ploughman. In Australia, interestingly, the idyll itself has only tended to be successful when it is Boeotian in flavour; here, the comparison might be drawn between Norman Lindsay's invocations of Pan plus nymphs and the verse of Banjo Patterson. Getting back to the point, though, we might say that because of the atypical nature of Virgil's works, Dante's invocation of him was appropriate and not culturally disruptive in the Middle Ages – a period in which the highest Boeotian civilization in Western history flourished. Classical allusion, when passed through a Virgilian filter, did not interfere with Dante's deeply Boeotian purpose of creating a vernacular poetry capable of handling sublime matters.

The revival of Classical learning on a large scale, the so-called renaissance, was of course and by contrast deeply disruptive. It coincided with and aided the centralizing of power in royal courts and the end of the old decentralized life of Europe. Athens always tends to capture ruling classes when they become estranged from their territorial bases of power, and the urban merchant classes, cut off from the land from which their forebears probably fled, naturally confuse eminence with excellence and ape their betters. In Europe, the great autochthonous arts and fresh beginnings of

the Middle Ages were dismissed as 'Gothic' and replaced by self-conscious Roman-Athenian revivals, which eventually generated new high styles that remained dominant until that muddled upsurge we call the Romantic Revival. This last, of course, was not so much a Boeotian revival as a confused eruption of Boeotian and other elements, which the dominant classicizing styles had threatened to refine, or snub, out of existence. The Romantic period has not yet ended, of course, though it has become repetitive, decadent and sometimes actively violent. It has placed a number of cultural, as well as literal, bombs in our luggage. Boeotia, made desperate and driven to seek strange allies, becomes Nazi Germany, or present-day Cambodia, or some of the more fanatically anti-Western (but still irretrievably Westernizing) of the new African states.

Within our civilization, we repeatedly see a pattern of autonomous, distinctive art at the beginning of each people's cultural history, followed by the importation and imposition of the general Romano-Athenian cultural inheritance. In some cases, the native tradition will live on more or less vigorously at the level of folk art, with idiosyncratic works of strongly 'popular' flavour surfacing from time to time within the purview of the 'high' culture. Sometimes the native art, and the Boeotian order that it carries, will prove resistant. In the Gaelic-speaking world of Ireland and Scotland, it took the effective destruction of the native language to break the stubbornly Boeotian cultural preferences of the people. Again, in each of the newly conquered and newly settled countries of the New World, the same pattern is repeated. Each New World people gets, as it were, a short period of anarchic, makeshift cultural independence in which to produce its Chaucers and Langlands and its literary and artistic Gothic cathedrals, or at least the foundations for them. With the consolidation of an elite of the European sort in the country, and the establishment of the kind of educational and cultural set-up that goes with that, the period of distinctiveness normally comes to an end, or at least becomes embattled. If the new country is lucky, it will produce distinctive

figures of themes during its 'Boeotian' phase whose influence is powerful enough to modify the form that 'Athenian' civilization takes there when it is brought in. Whitman, a deeply Boeotian poet, is an example of such a figure. The tradition he founded is still productive and part of the reason for our being able to speak of a distinctive American poetry. In Australia, we did not get a comparable figure among our early poets, but instead we got a distinctive rurally-based popular tradition, as articulated through folksong, through the literary ballads of the Nineties, and through a number of writers in this century. Most notable, perhaps, was the attempt of the Jindyworobak school of the forties to integrate two of the great autonomous traditions of Australia, the rural-popular and the Aboriginal. At best, these fruitions of distinctiveness, these new departures full of idiosyncrasy and character, are the treasures of nationality and are among the few justifications there can be for the existence of nations and separate peoples. Athens is lasting, but Boeotia is ever-new, continually recreated, always writing afresh about the sacred places and the generations of men and the gods.

Written from the vantage of Peter Porter's personally necessary and long-maintained exile in London, his poem is a work of high importance as a cultural document, as well as being vivid and lively. However, I suspect that its argument will be widely resented, or evaded, in Australia. The judgement that it passes on Australian culture is precisely the one that many home-grown Athenians have been at pains to deny or deplore. And yet, in any sense broad enough to admit the great majority of Australians, our culture is still in its Boeotian phase and any distinctiveness we possess is still firmly anchored in the bush. However, we may resent the fact, too, we are seen almost universally in this light by others, and are held to our stereotypes with affection and scorn. Colonially obedient in so many ways, yet we fail to heed the metropolis when it tells us to be ourselves. Perhaps the fact that the advice often comes in the form of a dismissal may make us reluctant to take it.



Porter's poem is an ode with a flexible but never sloppy three-beat line, set out in six thirteen-line verse-paragraphs. It is not metrically complex or highly wrought; although he is a profound student of music and opera, Peter Porter does not usually seek after musical effects or dense interweavings of sound in his verse, though the construction of his poems often follows a quasi-musical logic. In most of his work, he will establish his metrical base early in a poem and then stick with it right to the end. He is clearly more interested in phrase and reference, in the poetry of what is said. He once worked in advertising – not entirely a bad training for a poet – and perhaps this sharpened his appreciation of phrase-making and succinct formulations. More than any other poet now writing, I think his work has the metropolitan tone, at once intellectual and colloquial, at home with rapid shifts of level, sudden deflations and witty juxtapositions. A Porter poem often works by heaping up a crucible-full of arcane and stylish references (he has the true urban and Athenian appreciation of style and of shifting stylistic resonances, developed to a very high degree of discrimination) and heating it with sheer intelligence, till a clear drop of unforgettable imagery or wisdom, most often elegaic, flows out. As I have said elsewhere, Porter is one of the best writers of last lines in the business.

At first sight, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Hesiod' seems more discursive than is usual in Porter's work, and it is more relaxed on the surface – until you notice that not a word in it is superfluous. It carefully matches up epithets from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, often in quotes, with strongly flavoured bits of Australian vernacular culture, and all the matchings are dead right. As far as the lore is concerned, the reference to kerosene in honey tins is a bit worrying: up home, it was mostly honey in kerosene tins. But let that pass. The poem is deeply Australian in many other ways, too. There is, for example, the reticence that prefers to say 'within myself', where another culture might speak frankly and, we fear, gaseously about the soul, the spirit, etc. And there is the way it catches, with just the right harsh image about 'kelpie yap-

ping', all the features of Boeotian art and tradition here that so grate on the sensibilities of our respectable Athenians. Advocates of an Athenian metropolitan model for Australian culture often point to the facts of demography, as if our habit of crowding into the cities didn't need, and instinctively seek, a strong corrective. We may be highly urbanized etc., but the society still has as it were a rural muse. And wilfully to go against the grain of the culture we have, instead of trying to enrich and develop it, immediately alienates one from the broad mass of the people, and this is one cause of the frequent raucousness of Australian avant-gardes. One can put oneself in the position of a Patrick White, at once enormously privileged and deeply disaffected, refusing compassion to all but a few freakish elements of the society. Or one may turn to making trendy populist gestures in which the people rightly do not believe. The fact is that 'high' Western art is now in a crisis and can no longer offer any useful paradigms for humane living. Luckily for us, the decay involved is an imported thing, and merely something to which a certain class feels it owes an allegiance. There is a very hard implicit suggestion for such people contained at once in the last two lines of the poem and in the autobiographical facts that underlie and inform the poem as a whole: this is the suggestion that Athenians do not really belong in Australia and might as well follow Porter's own example of self-exile. Nowadays, the direction of such exile would likely be more often America than London.

Above all of the poem's many felicities, though, it is its cultural relevance that makes it fascinating and, in the critical sense, enormously productive. Once it raises the part-historical, part-metaphorical conflict between Athens and Boeotia, and identifies Australian culture as essentially Boeotian, its radiance, to use Aquinas's term, spreads out in all directions and illuminates all sorts of things beyond those explicitly mentioned in the text. One even begins to notice the ultimate non-urbanity of works we had thought were secure classics of high Athenian art here. Slessor, for example, can suddenly be seen as a poet whose work followed the

classic Virgilian progression from willed Athenian literariness slowly but surely towards a profoundly Boeotian achievement, culminating in the great funeral ode, 'Five Bells' and in the democratic funerary commemoration of 'Beach Burial'. He is a city poet, but not, we begin to see, a metropolitan one. Rather, his work at once constitutes and points to the possibility of a kind of urban art appropriate to Australia, with her wide, scattered, half-Boeotian garden cities, and to modes of literature that might yet help us to counterbalance other, dangerously cosmopolitan, imports. All this becomes a little ironic, when we remember Slessor's strong concern, and the concern of that whole *Vision* school of Lindsayite Arcadians, to oust the bush from what they considered to be its excessive pre-eminence in our literature. What they ultimately achieved was to extend the range of a strongly unitary culture when it needed extending.

Whether the pre-eminence of the ballads and other vernacular poetry was excessive at one time or not, it is true that these sorts of writing remain the core of whatever specifically Australian poetry the nation's people still value and refer to. And it is here, with the position of the people to whom Athens perennially offers nothing and whom she disdains as *hai polloi*, the Ockers, 'your average suburban yobbo' and the like, that I have to begin to fight against Peter's poem, or rather against its untimely, if personally valid and honest conclusion. I cannot believe in that 'permanently upright city' of willed disengagement from the past and unending personal development. And even if I could, surely now would be the worst possible time to go seeking it, at least among the literal metropolises of Europe. Peter says all this, however, in the phrase 'Europe's Entropy', implying that an almost Old Testament fear of the wicked metropolis still felt by some Australians is merely a theme of ours, a convention one can subscribe to or not.

Fair enough. So let's come at it another way. One of the few Athenian features that has 'taken' in Australian society has to do with the image of the artist. In Boeotia, he is a craftsman, with some remnant of priestly dignity. In Athens, nowadays, he is an

intellectual, a member of a class for which entropy and the corrosive analysis of value are principles of life. Or he is a Bohemian, a licensed buffoon, a disruptive element expected by Platonists of all persuasions to threaten the public order, usually pretty harmlessly, and to generate new styles of behaviour and adornment. Just as Romano-Athenian art, in its decay, tends towards excessive satire (Rome's only distinctive contribution to literature), towards Dada and the absurd and the ultimate scrambling of all values, so our modern Athenian artists are subtly encouraged to abandon the Works and cultivate the Life, and the Death, as a performance. The metropolis can offer the fierce excitements of entropy, but no real cure for the decays it continually exposes. And even the virtues of its faults now seem to be disappearing. With Marcel Duchamp in the early years of this century, we reached the era of the Avant-Garde. As the American critic Clement Greenberg points out, it was at this stage that the sense of shock and outrage felt by the public at the appearance of new styles of art ceased to be a by-product of real novelty and became the *subject* of much new art. Newness became a set of 'looks', of gestures, and the appearance of artistic innovation became an *effect*, and came within the range of uninspired calculation. In poetry as in many other arts, the pursuit of real or pretended novelty of course alienated the broad reading public which had existed for it in the 19th century, and delivered us into the doubtful shelter of coteries and universities. In such surroundings, a quasi-politicised avant-garde has recently flourished in Australia, and at one time consciously tried to take over the whole centre-stage of Australian literature. It failed to do so because its products were simply not good enough; the modernist rituals could be seen as repetitive, cyclic and derivative, and the practitioners, with one or two exceptions, lacked the necessary talent or even intelligence. A few years ago, the metropolis could still offer intense intellectual satisfaction in artistic form, but now the age of the great intellectual aerialists seems to have almost passed away. With W. H. Auden dead, Porter himself is one of the few really first-rate intellectual poets left. As

the older European values crumble away, Europe's artists begin, often, to look simple-minded and lacking in subtlety; under socialist influence, many are making self-consciously 'proletarian' gestures and trying, often clumsily, to express attitudes that we have been articulating and refining for generations in the New World.

Perhaps I am being simple-minded myself, in seeming to confuse Porter's upright city with any literal metropolis. The ideal city is ultimately in the mind, and is glimpsed in the art a person produces. This makes Peter's position a lonely one – and, in fact, many passages in the poem give us a sense of loneliness, of isolation sought and accepted. This may be how it has to be. To shift our paral lel just a bit, Athens can't be restored, as a city of art, in Hellenistic times. Still less during a period of barbarian irruptions. There is wisdom in Australia's Boeotian ness; it may be a good sheet-anchor for us during the period of collapse of many of our parent cultures – many, because not all of our culture derives from Europe, just as not all Australians are of European descent. Some, the black Australians, have been here for tens of thousands of years and their culture is a Boeotian resource of immeasurable value for us all. Again, the idea of our deliberately remaining Boeotian is full of exciting possibilities. It would be something, indeed, to break with Western culture by not taking, even now, the characteristic second step into alienation, into elitism and the relegation of all places except one or two urban centres to the sterile status of provincial no-man's-land largely deprived of any art or any creative self-confidence. This is what is at stake. The centre of Athens isn't the Pantheon, but the Agora, the chatty, educative market-place – but the centre of Boeotia is every place held sacred by any Boeotian. Interestingly, we have admitted this as a definite principle in the case of the Aborigines. This may be a brake on our denying the principle outright as regards our other constituent cultures. Perhaps in saying that we are still Boeotian in the essentials of our culture, Peter's poem has put its finger on a real if subterranean reluctance to take that second and fatal Western step. And this despite the fact that our education system is

Athenian from top to bottom and generates a terrific pressure in favour of the centralizing metropolitan pattern of culture.

A nation, a people, is always of more value to the rest of mankind if it remains itself – where else are new ideas and new models for living to come from, if not from idiosyncratic human variety on a scale large enough to command attention? It may just be reserved for us to bring off the long-needed reconciliation of Athens with Bocotia and create that lasting organic country where *urban* and *rural* no longer imply a conflict, and where one discovers ever more richly what one is and where one stands and how to grow from there without loss or the denial of others. But our ultimate choices in this will be made by deep movements in the life and mind of our people, and may in fact be made irrevocably before anyone detects what road has been taken. Some years ago, before Peter Porter's very candid and generous reconciliation with his homeland, in an interview he said: 'I've kept my Australian passport; I don't quite know why'. Pindar of Kynoskephalai (literally, Dog-heads – perhaps not a bad equivalent for post-war Brisbane, the city Peter left to go to London) also travelled far from home for professional reasons; he paid his fine, too, for praising a splendid city that deserved praise, and likewise never renounced his Theban citizenship. However hard I may have presumed to argue with the last eight lines of Peter's poem, it is nevertheless one of the central works in our literature, on a par with the very finest poems we have to show. Its wider significance goes well beyond our place and time.

So much for the conversation, and the argument, in prose. The poem with which I promised to conclude this talk is one entitled 'The Returnees', which I first published in *Poetry Australia* in 1975 but which was written towards the end of 1974. I hope it will cast some further light on the matters we have been discussing. Amongst the many things it celebrates, if we look at it retrospectively, is my profound agreement with Porter's naughty thesis.

## THE RETURNEES

As we were rowing to the lakes  
our oars were blunt and steady wings

the tanbark-coloured water was  
a gruel of pollens: more coming down  
hinted strange futures to our cells

the far hills ancient under it  
the corn flats black-green under heat  
were cut in an antique grainy gold

it was the light of Boeotian art

bestowing tourbillions that drowned  
the dusty light we had used up  
pulling the distance to us, we  
were conscious of a lifelong sound

on everything, that low fly-humming  
melismatic untidious endless  
note that a drone-pipe-plus-chants or

(shielding our eyes, rocking the river)

a ballad – some ballads – catch, the one  
some paintings and many yarners summon  
the ground-note here of unsnubbing art

cicadas were in it, and that Gothic  
towering of crystals in the trees  
Jock Neilson cutting a distant log

still hearing, we saw a snake ahead  
winding, being his own schnorkel

aslant in the swimming highlights, only  
his head betrayed him, leading two  
ripples and a scaled-down swirl. We edged

closer, were defied and breathed at.  
A migrant, perhaps? A pioneer?  
or had a kookaburra dropped

him, missing the organ-busting ground  
and even the flat of the drinking-ground?

Touching the oars and riding, we  
kept up with the blunt, heat-tasting head  
debating its life, and sparing it

which is the good of Athens. Where  
the rotted milk-wharf took the sun  
flint-hard on top, dappling below

(remembered children danced up there  
spinning their partners, the bright steel cans

a way of life. But a way of life.)

the snake rose like a Viking ship  
signed mud with a scattering flourish and  
was into the wale of potato ground

like a whip withdrawn. We punted off.

Oar-leather jumping in spaced kicks  
against the swivel-screw of rowlocks  
we hauled the slow bush headlands near

drinking beer, and talking a bit

such friendliness shone into us, such  
dry complex cheer, insouciant calm

out of everything, the brain-shaped trees,  
the wrinkling middle gleam, the still  
indifferently well-wooded hills, it was



like rowing to meet your very best  
passionately casual and dead friends  
and feast with them on a little island

or an angel leaning down to one  
queuing on the Day, to ask

*What was the best throw that you did?*

that note, raised to the pitch of tears:  
tower of joking, star of skill,  
gate of sardonyx and worn gold

*Black men and Rosenberg and I*  
*have beliefs in common*, I exclaimed

and you were agreeing that Mao Tse-tung  
had somehow come to Dunsinane –

Any more brightening and it would  
have been a test, but the centre we  
had stirred stopped down again, one notch

to happiness, and we were let dip  
our points in the wide stopped water and  
reclaim our motion. Bloodwood trees

round there were in such a froth of bloom  
that honey dripped on shale and gummed  
blady-grass in wigwams and ant-towns

sweetness, infusing, followed us  
*Reality is somebody's*, you said  
with a new and wryly balanced smile

*we're country*, and *Winters*, I replied.

# Tortures, Jealousy Tests and Getting Tough

I tortured Jenny Little, now an actress in London, with the Chinese burn. Telephone Jenny Little in East Sheen and ask her if she remembers being tortured at Nowra Infants School near the Headmistress's garden with the Chinese burn. The garden where you found nuts you could shoot at each other's eyes with your thumb. Along from the trees which at the right time of the year provided the rough nuts on the end of a stalk, a blow from which could cause a headache. Or if these were out of season, you could roll your handkerchief and twist it into a cosh which each year had to be banned because of headaches. You had to be careful or the girls would hold you down and kiss you. Finger cracking will make your knuckles larger. Being double-jointed was a good thing and could be demonstrated now and then when remembered. Blushing, warts, ear wax, toe jam, snot eating, and excreta smells were something to watch for in others and to be quickly pointed out with derision until the person cried. Farts should always be denied. Muscle biceps were to be developed by flexing and lifting of weights when remembered. If you wanted to be a commando Chinese burns were inflicted by grasping the flesh of the forearm with both hands and twisting one hand clockwise and the other otherwise. Tongue poking was always an insult and deserved retaliation. Face pulling could be used to force someone to laugh and get them into trouble but you had to watch for the wind changing. Holding up your little finger would always make someone laugh if you kept a straight face. Tortures apart from the dreaded Chinese burn, include forcing someone to the ground, sitting on them, pinning their arms with your knees, and drumming on their chests with your fingers, or the Chinese water torture – dripping water on their forehead drop by drop until they went mad and were never the same again, which we never got right, or by bringing the blade of a pocket knife close to the throat, or by tickling the feet or armpits or by holding someone's nose and covering their mouth until

they smothered. Or gagging someone with a dirty handkerchief and tying them up and leaving them. Tortures can be used to extract secrets or to make someone cry. You can give yourself a 240 volt shock by biting hard on both little fingers, linking the fingers and pulling sharply. If the light shines through the palms of your hand when you hold a torch to it you will always be broke when you grow up. If the letter M appears in the lines on the palms of your hands you'll marry.

A blow to the temple will kill, a blow to the throat will cause choking (ask Clive Robertson who was hit near the bubblers). You can hit someone in the throat if he is older. A blow to stomach will cause winding, a blow to the jaw will cause unconsciousness. No hitting below the belt. No punching in the kidneys. Is being unconscious the same as being asleep or is it more like being dead or more like being hypnotized. What's being hypnotized like? What happens when a girl faints like Isabella Smart. Place your palms together, cross your thumbs, if the right thumb goes over the left you'll be a boss, if the left thumb goes over the right you're artistic. The monkey grip cannot be broken. You'll die if you swallow your tongue. If you have flat feet you cannot join the commandoes and you'll never win a race. If you close your eyes and hold your breath, black will become white and you will see the stars. Holding your breath underwater until you see stars is good for your condition. If you punch with your thumb inside your fist you'll break your thumb. Girls can spit, bite, slap, pinch and pull hair. Boys can punch, thump, strangle and kick. Turning around in circles with your eyes shut is a way of making yourself sick if you have to. If you rub hair oil in your hands or pepper tree leaves, a caning won't hurt. Never admit to an enemy that anything can hurt you. Can you whistle by putting your little fingers in the corners of your mouth? A boy may pinch a girl's backside but nowhere else. A girl can pinch anywhere. Boys can tickle girls and vice versa. Tickling someone can send them mad. You blind a cat by putting soap powder in its eyes which could be used against an enemy or pepper. You can give someone a horse bite by savagely grasping the flesh at the top of the arm with your hand. You can give someone a rabbit killer by chopping them on the back of the neck with the edge of hand. You can give a cork leg by kicking someone's thigh with your knee. Can you pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time? Can you touch your nose with your tongue? Can you roll your eyes until only the whites are showing? If you hold someone's arm in a bucket of water they'll have to go to the lavatory. If you make the other person's nose bleed you've won. If you pin someone's arm to the ground to the count of three you've won. If you

twist someone's arm up their back until they say give in, you've won. Eating raw ginger and standing on your head for long periods are ways of becoming tough. You can stick a pin through the skin of your finger and it doesn't hurt. If you suck the soft part of your under arm you can give yourself a love bite. Knuckles is the toughest game there is. Hold your clenched fist against another boy's fist and count one-two-three. The fastest boy brings his knuckles down on the other's knuckles as hard as he can, causing immense pain. Drinking ink can kill you. Filling your mouth with water and wiping away any trace of it and then going up to someone and spitting it in their face is a form of surprise attack. Wiping snot on someone is another form of attack. Squeezing someone just above the knee with two fingers is a way of testing if they're jealous. If hairs grow on your legs it means you're becoming a man. If you hate hairs on your legs you shouldn't admit it. If you close your eyes while cleaning your teeth you're a homosexual. Hairs on the palms of your hands means you masturbate. If you look to see — that proves it. Grabbing another boy's cock is supposed to hurt and he is supposed to do it back to you. You're not supposed to show you like it. Wrestling until you get an erection is permissible as long as you both pretend it's a wrestle. A possum bite comes back at the same time every year at the same place you were bitten. A hanging willow makes good whips for whipping slave girls. When the girl who is playing nurse bandages your legs with dock leaves and binds them with vines, things happen in your groin. Girls walk differently after they've had their first sex. And you can tell.

## Mechanical Aptitude

Pass the stillsons. They are not the stillsons, I told you what the stillsons were last time. These are the stillsons. Now stand out of the way. Do you always have to stand in the light. No, that's not the one. I wanted the small one. Do I have to do everything myself. Now you're spilling it everywhere. Well, be more careful in future. In future use your head. Just take it slowly. You're spilling it, you're spilling it on my boots. Wake up

Australia. Your mind's a thousand miles away. You've put that on the wrong way around. It's screwed on back to front. How did you manage to do that. You can't find it. How can you not find it. If it were a snake it would bite you. How do you mean 'it just came off'. How could it 'just come off'. Why do these things happen to you and to no one else. Now stand out of the light. Now look what you've done. You wouldn't know it from a bar of soap. You wouldn't know if it was up you. If it was any nearer it would bite you. Look where you're going for godsake. Two left feet. Not that way, do it the way I showed you. All thumbs. How did it take so long. Where the hell did you get to. The lavatory — how many times a day do you have to go to the lavatory. Now pass that piece up to me. Not that piece — the other piece. How many times do I have to tell you. You don't listen. Here give it to me, I'll do it myself. Not that way, the other way. It's self explanatory. Well no one asked your opinion. Well it's not up to you. Well it's not up to you. What, precisely, do you think you're doing now. Well your best isn't good enough. Watch out behind you. Watch out you'll break that window. Take that smirk off your face. It's no laughing matter. I wouldn't want to have my life depending on it. I wouldn't want to be holding my breath. So's Christmas. Don't waste it. It's not hot enough. You've let it go cold. How did that get chipped. Look at that mess. You call that tidy. What about in the corners. Don't force it. Hey dreamy, wake up — Australia needs you. You wouldn't know if it was up you. I'll explain it all once more. I'm not going to tell you again. Look where you're going for Christsake. Is that what you call sharp. Can't you tell just by looking at it. Where do you think you're going now. Looking isn't going to fix it. What time do you think it is. It screws out, it doesn't pull out. Watch out for that wall. Come here and watch so that you'll know next time. Don't stand in the light. Just stay out of the road. What do you think this is — a picnic? What do you think this is — bush week? Well, there may not be a next time. Now look what you've done. It's no laughing matter. How long's a piece of string. If brains were dynamite you'd be safe. Where were you when the brains were handed out. Take the other end. This end, not that end. Not that way. Now get a proper grip of it. You're holding it like a girl. You take as long as an old woman. Left to right, not right to left. Clockwise not anti-clockwise. No, the other way dummy. Measure it again. Use a little elbow grease. Use a little nounce. Use a little brain power. Use a little brawn. Fellow, of Australia, blokes and coves and coots, get a bloody move on, have some bloody sense. Measure it before you cut it. Hold it straight. It's as crooked as a dog's hind leg. That's not

how I showed you. Now do it again and get it right this time. That's not very smart. Don't they teach you anything at school. And you're supposed to be bright. Now look what you've gone and done. Start over again. Holy cow — how did you manage to do that. It's in the bottom compartment of the tool box at the back of the truck under the coils of wire, the black handled one, not the other one, and the tinsnips and a five-eighths coachhead screw. What do you mean, you can't see it. Use your eyes. I told you to check it before you did it. And put things back where you found them. What sort of knot do you call that. That nut doesn't go with that bolt. Can't you just tell. That's not mixed enough. That's not hard enough. That's not long enough. It won't bite you. Take hold of it. It's not going to eat you. Easy does it. You're worse than a girl. Get a move on, we haven't got all day. Shine the torch where I'm working. No not there, over here. Hold it steady. Now pull. Pull harder. That's enough for godsake. Now look what you've gone and done. In future, stop when I say stop. Don't jerk it. You'll strip the thread. Can't you get it tighter than that. Now I'll tell you once more: this is the nosing, this is the waist, and this is the riser, and this is the thread, and this is called the going, and this is called the going of the flight, and we call this the raking rise. Got it? Frightened to get your hands dirty. Frightened of a few blisters. Short of puff. Put your hand in and get it out. It won't bite you. Don't just stand there, do something. What are you — an old woman. No one asked your opinion. Get your finger out. Get a move on. What did I tell you. What do you mean you can't see it. What do you mean you can't find it. What do you mean you didn't bring it. What do you mean you left it behind. What do you mean you thought we wouldn't need it. What do you mean you didn't think it mattered. Watch out for the wall for godsake. Do it once and do it right. You can't possibly see from over there. Don't throw it, hand it to me. Do I have to do everything myself. Now look what you've gone and done. Frightened to get your hands dirty. It won't eat you. You're worse than a girl. What do you mean, you didn't think it mattered. And what, precisely, do you think you're doing now?

Both these pieces are from work in progress called *The Oral History of Childhood*.

## Experiments with Form in Recent Australian Drama

Despite the tremendous strides made in recent years by Australian theatre and despite the dozen or more dedicated and professional playwrights which this has helped support there is nevertheless a greater sense of expectation than achievement in most public response to the plays and playwrights which have emerged. Distinctive, even distinguished, plays and writers can be found but there still seems to be a feeling that Australian theatre has not emerged from the age of promise into the age of fulfilment. This response is even more strongly reflected in the disappointed response of much literary criticism which still seems to feel that drama lags behind poetry and prose fiction both in the level of achievement and in the comparative lack of distinctive and innovative forms. Such criticism is valid in many ways, but it also exhibits a certain innocence about theatre and about the conditions in which the art flourishes and grows.

The theatre is a public and social form. Unlike the novel or the poem it is the product of an active collaboration of writer, performer and audience. Without skilled and informed interpreters the writer must restrict the range of effects he can hope to achieve successfully on stage; without an audience responsive to the conventions the play employs the writer cannot hope to communicate effectively, since in theatre all communication depends upon the evocation of and manipulation of audience response. The pace and speed at which an action proceeds on stage often precludes an audience from absorbing unfamiliar techniques readily and willingly, and even the best and most informed audience can be easily alienated by performers striving unsuccessfully to cope with skills and methods with which they are ill at ease. It is in the context of this reality that the Australian theatre's lack of ex-

perimentation must be seen and it is against this awareness that we must view the literary critic's disappointment. Nevertheless it remains a fair criticism that, viewed in a world context, recent Australian plays have often seemed unadventurous in technique and form. For the most part they have been content to remain within the naturalist conventions and to restrict their innovation to the subject matter they handle. At its worst such theatre deserves the label of animated social journalism which has been levelled at it; but, at its best, it has served to provide Australians with insights into their special conditions which have heightened their awareness of themselves in a significant way.

As I have implied, this lack of experiment has not necessarily been a failure on the part of Australian playwrights. Often it has been a recognition, conscious or intuitive, that the audience for Australian plays and the performers who realise them were not ready for a violent and abrupt rejection of realistic convention. Yet these same audiences and performers were more ready to accept and play works from overseas in which the most radical techniques were displayed. It is an odd fact of life that audiences will more readily accept innovative treatments of the unfamiliar and distant than of the immediate and well-known, as if the psychological shock of viewing the familiar through the spectacles of art constitutes in itself a sufficiently radical perceptual leap, at least in the initial stages.

In this sense the revolution in Australian drama over the last ten to fifteen years parallels the revolution of the mid-Fifties in Britain, where the commercial theatre was challenged by plays of essentially the same dramatic form but which violated the conventions of what constituted acceptable theatre subject matter. Just as *Look Back in Anger* or *Chicken Soup With Barley* asserted that the working classes were suitable cases for theatrical treatment, so *Don's Party* or *White With Wire Wheels* replaced the traditional, usually rural, stereotypes of Australians with portraits of the real, urban modern Australia, middle-class, affluent and conformist.

One feels considerable sympathy for David Williamson's complaint that most theatre critics have attacked his plays because he insists on writing plays which his audiences can understand and



respond to. Unlike his critics, as a working playwright he is only too familiar no doubt with the truth that in theatre what you are able to say depends largely on whom you are saying it to, at least if you wish them to listen. This does not imply that the playwright accepts and flatters the prejudices and ideas of the audience he addresses. It simply means that the responses of the audience, not the words on a page, are the vocabularies through which an effective theatrical statement is made. The rhetorical aim of the playwright is to shape these responses, to alter and extend them through the juxtaposition of familiar situation and unexpected reaction. By varying the elements, placing the devices in an unfamiliar order, creating fresh interplays between characters and stock situations, the audience can be lured from its accustomed cover and forced to consider itself and its surroundings in a new and unfamiliar light.

In *Don's Party*, for example, the crude hedonism which characterises so much Australian suburban life is wedded to a study of the social and political effectiveness of the liberal, middle-class elite who usually see themselves as insulated by their intelligence from the values which surround them. By observing how the two intertwine in reality the writer can show us and them (if we allow such a distinction) how the pursuit of the good life has debilitated people whose moral feelings and intellectual ideals cry out for some more testing form of open and public action. The bitterness and disappointment this produces and which pervades the world of the party is highlighted by the cheerless energy with which the characters like Coolie pursue the dream of pleasure, whilst the television chattering out the failure of liberal Australia to make its impact felt at the polls links the action to the wider social conditions of which these people are the product.

*Don's Party* is not a didactic play, and any brief attempt to articulate my response to its ideas does less than justice to the humour and understanding which it brings to its presentation of the characters. There is a vigorous acceptance of the characters not as ideals but as the reality which Australian society has to work with. Precisely because of this realistic portrayal it has a radical purpose, to insist on the need to see Australia as it is before

we can change it. The audience must accept what it sees as credible and, deny it as they may, a mirror which reflects many aspects of themselves. For such a task naturalism is the appropriate form and in theatre no form which is appropriate to the playwright's particular aim is intrinsically wrong.

Unfortunately, perhaps, the literary critic approaching plays of this kind is searching less for an appropriate theatre style than for one which is innovative for its own sake. Theatre everywhere has suffered more than any other art-form from the obsession of twentieth century European aesthetics with the new and the innovative. As an art-form which addresses a group it has special problems. In the two to three hours a play takes to perform the audience must be able to 'read' the special languages of the performance. It must be able readily to understand the givens of the exercise. For this reason much innovative theatre in the early part of the century, and even more recently, has taken as its subject matter precisely this problem of changing in the course of the play the audience's understanding of the rules of its own response. The classic in this respect is, of course, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; in many ways it would be more appropriate to substitute Audience for Author in the title, since it is the changing of the built-in response of the audience to the events on stage which the play aims at. Unless this is the primary concern of the play an anti-illusionist convention may be as inappropriate as any other. There are no absolutes of form involved in the judging of a play. Thus for Australian playwrights of the late sixties and early seventies the critical demand for a theatre which reflected the new techniques made fashionable by French Absurdist plays might well have seemed only a self-indulgence, inappropriate both to their purposes as artists in the society and as men trying to communicate with the existing audience and alter its consciousness in an effective way. Significantly, in conversation, David Williamson has told me that when he began to write as a student he wrote in the Absurdist style and that he came back to naturalism as a more appropriate form for what he had to say and the audience he was trying to reach.

But, of course, just as there is nothing intrinsically wrong about

employing a naturalist technique where it is appropriate for the theatrical aims so there is nothing specially and significantly permanent about the Australian audience's response to naturalism. As I tried to argue earlier the very unfamiliarity of seeing themselves and their surroundings on stage in a realistic way might have constituted a sufficient perceptual gap for the audience in the beginning, and may have alienated them from accepting distorted and stylised images of this reality. But the sophistication of audiences grows rapidly. Many people who were won back to a sense of the relevance of the theatre because for the first time it was presenting an art directly relevant to their own time and place were also embracing, perhaps unconsciously, a more general impression that theatre could be a place where a serious and important artistic activity was possible. Theatre was ceasing to be what it had appeared to be for a long time, a place where a few went to discover culture and was again becoming a place where they went to discover themselves. The old truth was being renewed that no theatre, however vigorously it pursues technical excellence, or however effectively it communicates the great classical repertory can ever have a sustained and powerful artistic effect on its audience unless it also treats seriously the images and ideas of its own time and place. As a result a new seriousness and concern for theatre form as such was generated, as is witnessed by the many radical and experimental plays performed to the evident delight of the audience by groups such as the Pram Factory in Melbourne or the Nimrod in Sydney. Likewise this new concern with theatre was reflected in the challenging new responses to the classics of young directors and actors like John Bell, Richard Wherrett and Rex Grahame. In such a climate change and innovation in Australian plays was bound to follow. Now the possibility existed to develop from this rich mixture of writers, performers and audiences, bound together in a mutual excitement at the rediscovery of the importance and relevance of theatre, experiments with form which would be more than a copying of conventions from other traditions, a dressing up of themes in borrowed robes. The chance was there for young writers and directors to experiment with forms appropriate to the special concerns and responses of the

audiences they had won. This second round of Australian theatre is just beginning and it is with this process that I want to concern myself in the second half of this paper.

It is not my main purpose to award accolades, to single out the best or most successful plays to date. An honest appraisal of innovative work in recent Australian theatre would have to conclude that as far as most of the work is concerned it has been less than satisfactory. Nevertheless a start has been made and one can begin to discern certain directions which this is taking.

The most obvious, and earliest, break with naturalism, and one of the most complete to date, was Bob Ellis' and Michael Boddy's *King O'Malley*. The show has few subsequent rivals for the exuberance and spirit with which it blended music, mime and anecdote into an irresistible mixture. Yet *O'Malley* finally has the quality of a one-off event, and suffers from the limitations as well as excellences intrinsic in uniqueness. Its effect on Australian theatre was incalculable, showing as it did that plays did not have to be linear in structure, reliant on verbal exposition and realistic in mode in order to work in the Australian theatre. But it has not, nor by its nature could it, serve as a model for later writers except as a compendium of technical possibilities.

What then are the main kinds of play other than the naturalist which can be discerned at this point in time? Two major forms seem to me to be emerging. First, there is the play centrally concerned with the exploration of the inner world of a single character. Secondly, there is the play concerned to articulate some central metaphor for our society and to explore the dominant images which shape Australian consciousness. Often these two come close together and intermingle in a single structure, as some examples will show, so that distinguishing the two is rather like differentiating between two profiles of one face. The metaphor is appropriate since, as one would expect, the overriding concern of both is to delineate the special Australian identity and to assert its uniqueness and relevance.

In the first case, the naturalist theatre provides a clear starting point in plays like Kenna's *A Hard God*. The heart of the play is the exploration of Jo Cassidy's growth into an awareness of the

problem of identity forced on him by his inability to reconcile his feelings of love for his friend Jack Shannon and his Catholic upbringing. The vividness with which Kenna re-creates the family life of the Cassidys and the realism of touch he brings to character and incident should not obscure the fact that essentially the play seeks to articulate the growth of an inner awareness, and one could envisage the play written in quite a different mode in which this fact would be reflected in the form as well as the content. In *A Hard God* the effects on Jo of his Catholic upbringing are the conditions of Jo's presentation and of our concern with him, not the concern of the scene as such.

The same fundamental distinction applies to Buzo's *Coralie Laundstone Says No* where, despite the themes of liberation and the social pressure on women, it is with the special growth of Coralie herself that we are concerned. Despite its naturalistic framework, the language of Buzo's play presses outwards towards dramatic monologue, towards a direct articulation of the inner flow of Coralie's thought to the point where the realistic setting is sometimes overburdened with the weight of it. In Scene Four of the play, for example, when Coralie returns from the party to the waiting Stuart the naturalistic framework is a mere device to disguise an inner monologue in which verbal image replaces action as it must in any naturalist play which reaches out from social analysis towards an attempt to symbolise inner states.

#### SCENE FOUR

*Late that night. STUART is asleep on the sofa, the book on his chest. Silence. CORALIE appears in the right doorway. She stands there very still. She carries her shoes in her hand. When she starts to speak, STUART wakes up and looks at her.*

CORALIE: Night makes it better, you know. The whole area seems reasonably beautiful, the whole palsied landscape seems tangible when you're down by the beach looking up and you walk through the shadows of the bananas and there aren't all that many lights. The freaks are asleep. All the moaning has stopped. It's silent, like a ship in the night. I've been down on the beach and among the bananas. I've been there for hours. I left the party, left all the creeps to drink and talk and line up screens for the night. I left my 'escort', he was far too charming, and he frightened

me a bit because he really is serious and he does seem to want me for something I can't face at all. So I left and walked and walked and sat on the beach and looked at the outline, the rocks and gums, the cracked shells and clustered droppings with very few lights and the freaks within and I surged up inside because I wasn't really part of this design, this conspiracy. And the surging peaked and then sank inside and I lay on the sand and I thought of the party and him and what he wanted me to do and the more I thought and the deeper I got into the night the more blurred the landscape became and the hill seemed like floodlights through a skeleton and the humming got louder so I went for a paddle in the sea. And I tried to think and my thoughts were physically painful and I walked through the rocks and the trees, through the bananas and heard the odd snatch of freaky life as I hauled up the steps to the top, where the most frightening thing of all was that this house seemed almost comforting.

*(She is by now sitting on the sofa beside STUART. They kiss.)*

You'll have to treat me well. I must be treated well.

FADE OUT.

The pressure toward a more direct expression of a character's thoughts so obviously present in a scene of this kind, and so clearly at the heart of the playwright's concern, obviously requires a dramatic form which can more openly and readily accommodate the articulation of inner feeling and state. As an example of the kind of experiment towards accommodating this need that Australian writers are now conducting we might consider Dorothy Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous*. Hewett has chosen to acknowledge openly in the setting and dramatic structure that she is principally concerned with the psychic growth of her central (strongly autobiographical?) character Sally Banner and through an exploration of her growth as a person in search of her own needs and values to explore the difficulties Australian society still offers to a woman who demands equality in sexual as well as economic and social terms. Her solution, and it is an intriguing one, is to frame the action as a pilgrimage, employing the image of the quest and drawing on this for symbols which can be directly translated into settings on stage. Thus, for example, the opening scene against a stylised version of the school chapel provides a

schematised way of identifying locale and frames the action by an image of that Chapel Perilous, the inner sanctum of herself, which will be the lifelong goal of Sally's search. The shaping forces of parents, church, education etc. which in a naturalist play would need to be drawn in time-consuming detail are schematically presented as three life-size masks which remain throughout (symbolising the continuing presence of their influence through life) and from behind which the actors playing these characters emerge. These actors, in turn, take on other roles as the action unfolds, suggesting again that such early embodiments of social pressure and rigidity are in their turn only masks which other figures fill as one's life changes and the patterns into which the past sets one alter with circumstance and situation. The long prologue which forms essentially the first act of the play is followed by the nominal Act One and here the flexibility of the setting is illustrated, the masks of authority remain but the altar becomes a kind of tiring rack from which characters obtain costumes as needed to play the multiple scenes which illustrate Sally's search for an effective relationship which can satisfy her needs. At the end of that Act when she has moved in with the communist agitator, Thomas, the same set can be used to represent the political platforms from which Thomas speaks, and around which Sally waits, the whole, significantly, surrounded by neon-lit fairground signs. The flexibility of this set can therefore be seen to be not only practical in a play which depends on a very swift flow of scenes to accommodate its episodic and fragmented nature but to lend itself to metaphorical extensions of the central theme, identifying as it does the 'liberal' creed of Thomas with the 'reactionary' creed of the church, since pulpit and platform are one and the same. In a play structured in this fashion, much of the action will be clearly symbolic and Hewett embraces the freedom this affords her to compress and allegorise freely and frequently. Sometimes the effect of this can be overdone, for example here is the section where Thomas catechises Sally in her new faith.

... it's Thomas Sally, you remember Thomas.

SALLY: (without turning) Doubting Thomas?

THOMAS: Believing Thomas. I've come to save you Sally. Repeat after me: I believe in Marxism-Leninism.

SALLY: I believe in Marxism-Leninism.

THOMAS: The dictatorship of the proletariat.

SALLY: The dictatorship of the proletariat.

THOMAS: To serve the working people.

SALLY: To serve the working people.

THOMAS: And promote the cause of peace.

SALLY: And promote the cause of peace.

Comical as the effect is here it is a device which Hewett often overworks and which labours to make a point already effectively made by the juxtaposition of event and setting. This dialogue perhaps reflects the writer's fear that the audience will not 'get' the message implicit in the structure unless it is reinforced verbally. The playwright is still unsure of the audience's easy familiarity with these techniques and worries herself into dramatic overkill.

One major advantage the technique must afford, however, is to dispense with the illusion of natural conversation where this is clearly a scene of direct exposition of thoughts the character's have or have had about the events described. Unfortunately, Hewett often ignores this possibility, even when it would clearly serve her purpose. For example, in the following 'conversation' between Sally and Michael, whom she has left for Thomas, a more direct form is clearly crying out to be released from the 'conversational' strait-jacket.

MICHAEL: I could always remember the shape of your face. I could draw it like a heart in the dark. And yet there'd be times when I couldn't remember you at all. And suddenly, you'd be up and betray me. You were a bitch, the things you'd do to me.

SALLY: What things?

MICHAEL: There was this Canadian nurse. I was in bed with her. You're jealous?

SALLY: Yes.

MICHAEL: I had all her clothes off. She was lovely, and suddenly I said, 'I love you, Sally', just like that. It was fatal. She froze. 'Who's this Sally?' she said, getting dressed. So I told her, 'You'll go back home and marry her after the war', she said, 'No', I said, 'Sally and I weren't geared for marriage'.



SALLY: I thought if I tore you out of me I'd be deformed in some way. I'd need plastic surgery. So after you left I lay down anywhere for practically anyone who asked me. I wanted to destroy myself, because I didn't exist any more. Not as a whole, loving, complete human being.

The result, as in the final line, is often a verbal banality that does less than justice to the central dramatic meaning of the scene as the audience's credibility is stretched along with the natural tone of the 'conversation'.

There is still a great deal of unsureness in this experiment, and the play as a result fails to make the clearest and most effective use of its techniques; but, at its best *The Chapel Perleous* recognises that it is the exploration of character through explicit dramatic device which is at the heart of its fresh technical conception. When this is accepted Hewett is able to bring together in stage images an action, a presentational style and a language which dramatises rather than imitates those moments of human insight which are her concern.

Here for example is Sally's discovery of Thomas the fiery revolutionary's sexual impotence.

SINGERS...

O it's friggin' in the riggin',  
It's friggin' in the riggin',  
It's friggin' in the riggin',  
And there's fuck all else to do.

*(They throw Sally and Thomas on bed, dance round in a ring. THOMAS in army issue woollen underpants, is drunk, holding on to bed head. SALLY is crouched on end of bed, crying, stripped to bra and panties.)*

THOMAS: I can't do it, Sally darling. I can't consummate our conjugal rights (sic). *(Touching her awkwardly)* Piss off you bastards. Sally and I can't consummate our conjugal rights.

*(Laughter. Figures dance and drink in dim light).*

DANCERS: *(singing)*

Poor Sally, she never made it,  
Not even suicide,

When she swallowed Lysol they gave her salt and water,  
So she never died.

MOTHER: (*rising to bed*) Sally, Sally, here's your wedding presents: a copy of Marie Stopes and a Dutch cap.

(*Laughter; MOTHER returns to mask*).

DANCERS:

Poor Sally, she married Thomas,  
They tried and tried and tried,  
In the honeymoon suite of the Hotel Bohemia  
They lay down and cried.

THOMAS: Sally, Sally, after the war is over we're going to change the world.

In the immediate following scene, Thomas goes behind the mask to play the Canon, reinforcing and extending the point made.

*The Chapel Perilous* is probably on balance a failure. Much of what Hewett attempts to do doesn't come off and she is often confused as to the appropriate dramatic form. The play seems often to overburden its central concern with Sally's development with a weight of social and political symbolism which drowns our response to the individual at the heart of it all. It is all too easy, given such a freeing technique, to employ a dramatic sledgehammer where a light tap would do. However, the central feature of the action remains that the writer is able to dispense with a machinery of background, of dialogue directed solely to establishing environment, of atmosphere, painting etc. ... and although the fact that she chooses to replace this discarded freight with a weight of over-explicit allegory and social analysis is unfortunate, it does not invalidate the central technique in which setting and action serve the exposition of inner response rather than the other way round. *The Chapel Perilous* is an attempt to find a dramatic style which can do openly what a more naturalistic play can only do covertly, to make the growth of an individual's response the ordering principle of a dramatic structure. As such it is an important and courageous experiment.

The second, and on the whole, more successful discernible line in recent plays has concerned itself with the exploration of Australian society through the use of some compelling central metaphor. Many of David Williamson's plays generate this kind of metaphorical density in the situations they explore, despite remaining essentially within the naturalist framework. *The Removalists* or *The Club* are only superficially plays 'about' police violence or Australian football clubs and serve as vehicles for a study of issues which go wider and deeper in Australian society at large. It is with an extension of this process coupled with an open acknowledgement of this at the level of form that the second group of plays of the second round are concerned.

One of the more successful recent productions at the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney, for example, *Brothers* illustrates how a play essentially 'about' a narrow and specific aspect of Australian society can generate for its audience a network of implications for the way in which Australians view authority and the relationship of the ideal and the down to earth. This play which is a monologue delivered by a Christian Brother teacher at the end of a long and wearing career teaching in a boy's school captures the difficulty in Australian society at large of maintaining a sense of the ideal in the face of a daily existence which has its values firmly rooted in the here and now, and yet which hypocritically insists on paying lip-service to the shells of religion, truth and the ideal. We feel pity for the teacher, aware of the emptiness of his ideals and yet clinging to the memory of his sexually-inspired reveries of the Virgin Mary summoning him from his adolescent bed to a life of service and worship. Yet this pity is eroded by the realism with which Kenna shows the sadism and cynicism which this disappointment has bred in him and which he passes on to his charges because of his own need to cling to the shattered remains of the dreams which in reality he has lost. Kenna avoids the problems of presenting interior action in a fully dramatised way. He employs the monologue as a device appropriate to his subject, a teacher droning on at his class, and so focuses our attention strictly on the figure himself and his metaphorical implications for the society he represents. Where an outside influence needs to be suggested a

gentle and effective mime supplies the need. The already great discomfort of former Christian Brother students in the audience must have been even further increased by the scene in which the teacher, addressing an empty chair, seizes an imaginary boy by an imaginary ear and sways him gently to and fro whilst talking in rhythm to the movement. The majority of the audience clearly felt as well as saw the imaginary child and suffered along with him. This play serves to show, too, how, as I said earlier, the two strains are not mutually exclusive, since Kenna's concern with the decayed old teacher as an image rich in implication for Australian culture at large does not preclude the play from exhibiting a deep concern with him as an individual and from reflecting his inner awareness of his growth to this plight through the rambling, self-justifying dialogue and the pointed and revealing anecdotes he puts into his mouth.

More recently Steve K. Speirs' play *The Elocation of Benjamin Franklin* extends the same approach, taking once again a central figure and presenting him in a stage monologue which explores his implications for Australian society at large. The central figure is an old transvestite elocation teacher who is the victim of a precocious and sexually avid pupil, young Benjamin Franklin. He is also the latest in that long line of public sacrifices on the altar of Australian worry about its sexual identity. His plight, though, is also an image of a more general concern with the violence and institutionalised brutality with which Australian society reacts to the nonconformist and individual. This violence is exposed as a reaction to its own libidinous fantasies which it suppresses, and projects onto its scapegoats, turning the harmless old worshipper of Mick Jagger posters into the transvestite terror of Double Bay. Once again the play avoids the difficulty of a fully dramatised structure, and employs the classic devices of the telephone and the letter to communicate with the other characters who never appear. Despite the change of locale in the second act and the violent end to act one, when the police burst in to arrest him on immorality charges, the play remains essentially a monologue of the same kind as *Brothers*. It has a similar success, too, in focusing attention

on the central character, though its concern is less inner and reaches out by dramatic device to implied action and interaction with the other figures in the plot. It is precisely because much of the effect depends on the existence of these implied figures and on the central character's interaction with them that one may begin to question whether or not there is a certain avoidance element involved in this choice of structure. Although the result is brilliantly effective, as much is potentially lost as is gained by the decision to focus the action through a single figure. Since the heart of the play concerns a relationship is it ducking the issue of how to obtain this kind of intensity with a fully presented action? Whatever one feels, the play certainly avoids the diffusion of effect which a fully naturalistic treatment would have made inevitable, and so emphasises the dramatic rather than narrative implications of the action it presents. In this case the choice of technique has worked, but one may ask how many situations would lend themselves so readily to so sparse a treatment. In the end the problem of exploring character interaction cannot be avoided and the tendency for recent Australian plays to do this by some technical device or other may reflect the problems they have in finding forms which can handle fully dramatised situations without resorting to a surface naturalism which may be inappropriate to their purpose.

It is in this context that I want to consider one attempt at meeting this problem and at making important dramatic statements about Australian society without resorting to naturalist technique. This is in John Romeril's *The Floating World*. Despite weaknesses in construction and in the style the play, nevertheless, seems to me to be the fullest and most intelligent attempt to date to wed experimental form to content. Throughout the play one feels that Romeril is asking a series of very important questions about Australian attitudes to the past, to the contemporary world and to Australians' ability to change in a constructive and valuable way; and, more importantly, that the structure as well as the dialogue is part of this questioning process. Romeril is a young man, not of that generation whose social and economic lives still revolve around the debris of the Second World War, the RSL, the

Anzac Day Parade and the prejudice against 'Nip products'. Yet Romeril has chosen to take this group as representative of a persistent attitude to the world outside Australia. His play is not about the Australian fear of the 'Yellow Peril' but about the persistent isolationism and xenophobia of which this is just a local example, and which feeds and is fed by Australian cultural paranoia about the world around it. The Floating World (significantly, the Japanese term for the life of the pleasure districts) is the world in which Australians live, a place apart, protective and yet confining, a hedonistic prison in which enclosed prejudices flourish and persist and are flourished in the face of the future, not from genuine passion but from a fear of change. Les's fear of the outside world drives him into the past and from there into a violent attack on reality. Yet the play is not concerned to examine his special plight in isolation from that of his audience with whom he shares a much wider condition. In fact Les's reaction, misguided though it is, and the catatonic withdrawal from reality he endures reflects uncomfortably on the relative complacency with which most of us in the audience accept the conditions which have forced him to this juncture. This point is forced home by the images at the end of the play when he reflects on his state now and the state he was in when he returned from the prison-camp at the end of the war.

LES: I lived in a dream – the ghost of a shoplifter from Myers, haunting the scene of the crime – time had stopped for everyone but me. When they left that night two-star Corporal Yomito lacked his vitamin B supply. I lived in a floating world.

Romeril's technique, with its fast movement from realistic scene to cabaret-style, and its employment of a group of actors exchanging roles as Les moves between 'reality' and 'fantasy' never allows the audience to relax into a comfortable distance from the action. They cannot escape from the implications of the action by pretending that it is a narrative of one man's inability to escape from his past nightmare experiences. In fact, instead of a narrative structure, Romeril holds the action together with a series of brilliant metaphors for those aspects of Australia which he wishes to

dramatise. The play is set on the liner carrying the 1974 Women's Weekly Cherry Cruise to Japan's symbol to all in the audience of that careful and tentative contact with Asia (and the world at large) which characterises the Australian tourist abroad. The liner, a converted troop-ship, and itself a floating world, a microcosm of that larger floating island world of Australia, moves slowly towards Japan, and for Les from the present towards the past. It is this past with its horrors and deprivations which symbolises the world Les fears and which he projects onto the present and onto any reality he encounters outside his Floating World. The floating world of a body swollen with beri beri was easier to escape from than the body he now inhabits, swollen with good living and too much of the 'old amber fluid'. As the liner draws away from the comforting world in which he has sheltered, and to which he has withdrawn as a refuge, the world outside becomes confused with the past as Les' intrinsic fear of reality asserts itself. Past and present join together into one image of the intolerable world outside, peopled with sadistic Nips or supercilious Poms, and it is this reality not the past from which he is unable to escape. Paradoxically, his return to the past is a retreat to a more comfortable world in which the enemy can be simply identified, mateship is a given thing and the need to adjust to new realities from day to day can be ignored.

Central to the play's effect is the breaking up of the expository, and narrative scenes by a series of illustrative sketches. The ship's cabaret, with its seedy Entertainments Officer, is employed for this end. The endless vulgar humour with which he bombards the passengers is, significantly, linked with the 'situation reports' of the Australian officer on the state of the war, or the new regulations and instructions for prison-camp life. Like the officer's reports, the clown's jokes serve only to dress up a hollow and vicious reality; dramatically, of course, they heighten our awareness of it by contrast.

CLOWN: As to Jap landings at places other than Kota Bahru (that's fancy dress this coming Sunday, fancy dress this coming Sunday) the Japs have landed at Kota Pahru and Kota Bahru only and if you don't believe me why don't you go there and ask them, ha ha ha!

The pathetic round of 'fun' on the cruise symbolises the energy which the society devotes to burying its consciousness of its own plight, and creates a reversed illustration of the old adage: Weep and the world weeps with you, laugh and you laugh alone. These people are laughing in an essential isolation on their floating, insulated world and the laughter in Romeril's images of them is bitter, hollow and redolent of warning and alarm.

In *The Floating World* Romeril has been at pains to make form and content fit. As with Dorothy Hewett the temptation to make the action too heavily symbolic has not always been resisted, though the effects are much more fully dramatised here and the moments of heavyhandedness are fewer and further between. The main flaw seems to be a crowding of effects which make them easier to conceive on a page than they are to realise on the stage, at least if we are to judge by the Nimrod production a couple of years ago. But, despite these flaws, and they are not major ones in a playwright who is at the beginning of his career, the play shows a powerful and directed impulse to explore form in the service of meaning and to experiment with technique to create effective stage images. Above all the play is almost unique so far in the frankness with which it conceives its events as image rather than as narrative and so points the way to an Australian theatre in which the narrative, naturalist technique will be used when it is dramatically appropriate and not, as has all too often been the case until recently, as the sine qua non of Australian dramatic technique.



# Zulfikar Ghose

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## NOTES TOWARDS A NATURE POEM

The object to be described is there, of course:  
one sees it whether it's the pot of geraniums  
beside which the cat is asleep, in the back garden,  
or the yellow and black swallow-tailed butterfly  
unable to abandon the honeysuckle, which it leaves  
in a repeated rehearsal of withdrawal only  
to come back to in a renewed fervour of desire;  
or it could be there in the imagination,  
that image of last summer which has stayed in the mind  
like a clichéd photograph of nature ... it could  
be one of many with birds, trees, flowers etc.  
There's no real problem since it's all there  
and one has not lost the capacity to look.

And yet it's become impossible to stick to a simple  
point of descriptive certainty, giving shapes  
their colour and weight: one can't avoid wondering  
about the subtler textures and the elusive tones,  
it's not just the bright orange of the marigold  
petals, it's also the tiny crescent of shade which  
is nearly black but not really black which each petal  
makes upon the one below it which has to be included  
if the description is not to be merely a label.

The felicitous epithet or the inspired metaphor  
are of no help; unless diversion can lead to  
a return of focus as when listening to a familiar music  
the mind wanders and a more deliberate attention makes  
us hear a phrase we'd missed in earlier listenings.

The desire to catch the thing itself in a simple phrase persists although we know it can't be done, it's like wanting to be that age again when we didn't drink or smoke, so that we could see the world more clearly, or like believing that an intenser sexual experience is possible than what we've known, it's an anxiety for a complete happiness that we're convinced can somehow still be ours. Or a nostalgia, like parading thirty years later in the uniform one wore in Normandy and remembering some glory attached to the event while forgetting the rain, the mud, the fear of death.

There's the creative confusion that comes from a knowledge of the other arts which always seem simpler and more uncluttered by peripheral considerations. One would like the extraordinary rhythm of Webern, for example, or be able to cover a canvas, so to speak, with a solid dark green and be convinced that one has caught a meadow in late evening on a summer's day in Gloucestershire, in July when the hawthorn no longer distracts with its white and pink.

This afternoon the clouds lifted;  
the sky was an indescribable blue.

E.G.

For example, the way the swallow-tailed wings of the butterfly open and close with the light throwing a diagonal shadow across the flowering bush in late autumn when the last flowers are weak, stunted and faded, or the way a migrating bird's feathers catch and diffuse the reddish glow of the sun falling towards the horizon: one thing or another is changing position, adjusting itself to warmth or seeking some new source

of nourishment and in the process unintentionally showing itself in a new light. But it's not just the instinct for survival in the late harsh weather or any other persuasion which involves one in that complex choreography that, suddenly realizing the seemingly impossible measure in which the body's extreme contortion appears precisely natural although it exceeds the normal limits of tension, brings about

a phenomenal change. The butterfly, for example, floating in the air just out of reach of the cat waiting to spring on it engages one in a double apprehension, the quiet moment is so charged with drama. The way the wings fold and unfold, one sees only a throbbing softness of yellow and black against the reddening autumn leaves, but a slight descent, provoking the cat to press into the ground in readiness for its murderous leap, causes the colours

to tremble in a vivid exasperation. The unfamiliar migrating bird, so distinct in the autumn light, makes one re-consider the assumptions held during the summer when the cardinals, blue-jays and mocking-birds raised their particular but abstract noise among the thick leaves. There was, sometimes at sunset, the occasional song of one which distracted the ear, but now, this bird, whose form one cannot identify,

rising up in the fresh norther which will take it far into Mexico, suddenly reveals, as the light touches its wings from below, that at the point where perspectives converge is a radiance and the thing departing, not wanting to be where it is, gathers about its body a dramatic exuberance, leaving to us a memory of its flight, the slight twitch of its wings as they hit the current going south, discovering there a liberating turbulence.

## THE DRAGONFLY IN THE SUN

The afternoon's light is caught  
in the dragonfly's wings where  
transparency permits no reflections  
and yet will not give free passage  
to the sun, preserving its surface  
brightness of delicate webbing  
as a fragile brilliance of gleaming  
points which make the wings nearly  
invisible and the diagonal markings appear  
as tiny irradiations of very faint  
pink and blue when the dragonfly  
darts up against the sun as if it  
plucked colours from the air  
and immediately discarded them:  
this is the moment of intensity,  
of the afternoon's light gathering  
in the garden in a brief flickering  
of a dragonfly's wings just above  
the red blossoms of the pomegranate.

YVONNE DU FRESNE

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## Armistice Day

From the nursery warmth of Miss Martin's infant room, tender as young  
geraniums flowering behind glass, we spied on the senior school. In the  
mornings there was an austere silence about that red-brick building.  
Sometimes a figure of a big boy or girl sped out of a door and marched,  
frowning responsibly, in the direction of the school toilets, hidden behind  
the macrocarpa hedge. After a discreet interval, they marched back

again. Sometimes a dull roar came out of the windows of Standard Five and Six.

*'Twice twelve are twenty-four,*

*Thrice twelve are thirty-six!*

*'Thrice!' We marvelled at that word.*

And we heard —

*'London is the capital of England! King George the Fifth is the King of Great Britain...'*

They were terribly keen on kings in that building. And on war.

In the afternoons we watched the seniors at their war games. They came out in a long black line, swinging their arms, scowling, and marched all over the tennis court. By the flag-pole stood the Headmaster, waiting for the lines to come to a dead stop in front of him. Miss Martin's children anxiously sucked their thumbs at the sight of that Headmaster. He was coloured grey — grey suit, grey face, grey hair and grey teeth. We hid behind bushes when we saw him coming, pointing imperiously. We watched the senior children darting about, stuffing paper bags into rubbish tins, or tearing out weeds with dreadful obsequious smiles. When we came face to face with him, we skittered past like ghosts, with our eyes half closed, so that he could not see us.

Our room was different from the rest of that school. It was always a sea of paste, newspaper, raffia, infant scissors, paste-encrusted brushes and plasticine. And our room was swayed by the latest ideas from the *Teacher's Monthly Guide*. It came all the way from England to be collected by Miss Martin from the Fancy Goods and Stationery Shop in the settlement. We clustered around her when she opened it, and gazed at those British girls and boys, calm, pale, *clever*, in their orderly classrooms, beside their Projects. Once they had made a model English village — out of what seemed to be cardboard and pieces of straw. We made one too. I became an authority on the Old English thatched cottage. We ranged tirelessly over other people's gardens, seeking good bits of moss for the Old English crazy paving paths that went with all those cottages. All my life since, I have not been able to pass a good crop of moss without a twitch in my fingers.

But one Monday we were faced by Miss Martin, cheeks pink with anxiety.

'Who has straight backs?' asked Miss Martin. 'Who can keep in step?' We gazed hopelessly at her. 'Today,' cried poor Miss Martin, 'we are going to join in with Assembly! Isn't that lovely now?'

It wasn't. With drooping mouths we waited for the signal. It came. A death-rattle on the school drum.

'Heads up!' pleaded Miss Martin, and we stuck out our chests and stumbled out of our door, cardigans around our elbows, hair hanging over our eyes, under the jeering gaze of the rest of the school, drawn up in their fearful ranks.

The Headmaster tapped one foot as we shuffled into place.

'Raise the right hand!' he commanded. Miss Martin's class became confused. Some raised the right hand, some the left, but most of us, knowing we were about to die, raised both.

'Boy!' growled the Headmaster. The drummer boy glared over our heads and started another death-rattle.

'I love God and my country,' warned the Headmaster. Ah! The poetry speaking! Miss Martin's class loved poetry speaking.

'I love God and my country!' we piped, beaming.

'I will honour the flag!'

'I will honour the flag!'

'And honour the King!'

'And honour the King!'

'And cheerfully obey the laws of the land...'

'And cheerfully —

But I was far away, peering at the far end of the playground, to where I distinctly saw the sad figure of King George the Fifth on his horse, saluting us, in what appeared to be a snowstorm, just outside Moscow.

Back in the classroom, Miss Martin gave her little announcement. 'Soon, my dears, is Armistice Day, and you are going to march all the way down the road, with the whole school, and put lovely flowers on the War Memorial. Today was just a practice, and you looked beautiful!'

We didn't believe it. Neither did Miss Martin. Her cheeks were flushed again. We should have taken that as a warning. 'I have had an idea,' announced Miss Martin, and she held up a giant picture in the *Teachers' Monthly Guide*. There those British children stood, proud but calm, dressed in suits of armour and lovely helmets, apparently made from cardboard boxes and little bits of chocolate paper. 'We,' said Miss Martin simply, 'are going to make helmets for our Armistice Day march.' Who could resist those helmets, the plumes, and so on? 'Feathers,' cried Miss Martin, becoming dangerously excited, 'and cardboard! You will have to scour the district!'

We commenced the scouring.

At home, I gave the family the news.

'On Armistice Day,' I announced at dinner, 'we are going to be old-fashioned soldiers of the British Empire.'

The family looked amazed.

'Warriors!' said my Bedsternoder, in a voice that should have warned me. 'Ha!' She spent the evening searching through the bookcase. She gave me a vast red book with a piece of paper sticking out of it. On the paper was carefully printed, 'Dansk Warrior of Old Days'.

I bore it to school.

Miss Martin excitedly opened it. There stood a Viking warrior wearing his fearsome helmet with the horns on. She peeped at him. The Viking glowered at Miss Martin. Miss Martin smartly shut the book.

'Horns, Astrid,' she said, 'would be a little hard to find!'

'We have some horns!' said Betty Cooper, 'old cows' horns that Dad —'

'British soldiers,' said Miss Martin, 'did not wear horns. Perhaps one day we will have a parade of warriors of the world. But just now — feathers — and cardboard!'

I haunted the henyard, eyeing the hens, and I haunted the local store, gazing hungrily at a cardboard sign of a lovely lady in a picture hat. 'Smoke Desert Gold,' announced the lady. I wished to see the other side of her, to see if the cardboard was snowy white. *Usable*.

'Taking up smoking now, are we?' asked the store-keeper, and hooted at his joke, day after day.

The days sped by to Armistice Day. Miss Martin grew haggard with the surprise. We did the sums, the compositions, with our eyes flickering regularly to those intricate cardboard shapes trailing long pieces of tape hanging from nails on the walls.

Outside, long lines of children marched to the drum-beat, the Headmaster barked commands, practising.

On the afternoon before the great day, Betty Cooper ventured to clear up a little mystery.

'Miss Martin,' she said, 'What is Armistice Day for?'

'Well —' began Miss Martin all over again, 'at the stroke of eleven, all over the Empire, everybody stops whatever he or she is doing — and Remembers...'

But while she talked, we glanced out of the window. And there, on the tennis court, sat a line of senior girls, twisting pieces of macrocarpa into wheels. We peered more intently. The macrocarpa wheels were wreaths, the kind you sent to funerals.

On the Day, we assembled early. Too early. We rushed to meet Miss Martin as she came to unlock the classroom door. Miss Martin checked when she saw us — best purses embroidered with raffia daisies, patent-leather shoes, best dresses with the fullness.

'Now remember,' she said, 'we must keep up, and not dawdle. We must be assembled in plenty of time for the speeches, for the wreath-laying, so that at eleven o'clock precisely, we may observe the Silence.'

We did the Arithmetic, to calm the nerves. Then the school bell tolled for the Dead, as usual; only this day, with more significance. With trembling fingers, we put on our helmets. I had harvested a fine collection of feathers for mine. It would ruffle nobly in a light breeze, I had thought. Through a storm of feathers in the rising wind, I watched with the others as the columns set off, to the battle drum-roll from that boy in Standard Six. We stayed somewhat concealed behind the school hedge.

'We do not wish to reveal our surprise too early!' explained Miss Martin.

Last of all the classes, we set off. But fate was against us. The road was covered with gravel; our patent-leather best shoes felt every stone. Our purses got in the way when we swung our arms. Then from far behind us we heard the remorseless tread of marching feet coming nearer and nearer. Peering through my feathers, I saw the Scout Troop, led by Mr Prowse, the Scout Leader. Behind him, big boys held banners. Those banners were so pretty.

'March just a little faster, dears!' urged Miss Martin.

Our helmets started to slip. My eyes were slowly covered in darkness. By peering intently through one side of my eye-piece, I saw Cherry Taylor, wearing her rustling flower-girl-dress, go slowly and more slowly.

With a fine flurry of flags and drums, the Scout Troop shouldered past. I distinctly heard Mr Prowse ask what the hell did we think we were doing, dressed up like sore toes and painted savages. We ignored him.

'Push up your helmets, dears,' urged Miss Martin.

We hung on to our helmets and purses with one arm and swung the other.

Far down the road, a sombre crowd clustered around the War Memorial. We faintly heard the drums.

'Faster, dears!' said Miss Martin, low but urgent. 'Swing your arms!' We swung our arms. Our helmets commenced the slipping again. Miss Martin fell back to retrieve Cherry Taylor, who had tripped.

We marched on, past the first houses of the settlement, past the iron



ranks of the senior warriors, past the Headmaster, standing in helpless rage among his funeral wreaths by the granite War Memorial, he and I the same grey. And helmets muffling our proud smiles, heedless of Miss Martin's warning cries, we marched on and on, and came to a halt at last, far, far past the War Memorial. Then, feathers in our mouths, we saw the incredulous faces of that silent crowd of parents, mine among them, and I heard, I heard the shameful, uncontrollable laughter of Onkel Sven echo over the ruins of Armistice Day.

Who laughed with him? The Fallen. Our Dead.

I think they get so tired of all those bugles and drums, I think they loved our helmets.

'Armistice Day' has now been published in Yvonne du Fresne's first volume of stories *Farevel* (Price Melburn for Victoria University Press). A review will appear in the next issue of *Kunapipi*.

DENIS HULSTON

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## A Note on Albert Wendt's *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree*

the faa-Samoa is perfect they sd  
from behind cocktail bars like pulpits  
double scotch on the rocks, I sd.

(Albert Wendt)

'I am "mongrel" – I am of two worlds in almost every way. It is a very lonely position ... you can never again belong totally to either of the cultures you grew up in. You will always remain an outsider'.<sup>1</sup> While one is aware of a regard for identity in community living which is part of the 'faa-Samoa', Wendt does not accept the

faa-Samoa as perfect. It may be easy to adulate a traditional golden age in reaction against a less than satisfying modern palagified Samoa, but Wendt suggests that such a golden age never really existed. One can understand a nostalgia for tradition, for submergence in the traditional view would provide an analgesic to alienation. But such an acceptance is not only impossible in so far as there is no return to the past, it is also an unrealistic view of the past. Wendt's nostalgia is qualified with awareness that traditional is not and never was synonymous with perfection. This feeling is suggested most directly in the poetry. The same view informs the short stories and novels, but there is a shift in these to an emphasis on the corruption inherent in an adoption of the colonial view, and a concern with identity in existential terms.

What may have been worthwhile in the traditional world has been corrupted by the colonial papalagi world. 'The papalagi and his world has turned us ... and all the modern Samoans into cartoons of themselves, funny crying ridiculous shadows on the picture screen'.<sup>2</sup> Paovale Iosua in 'Declaration of Independence' is such a man. He has lost his soul and become a puppet of a colonial system. His pride in his success is hollow for he is nothing more than a clerk serving a system in which he has no real part.

The world of the papalagi is a sterile one. Powerful in conveying this is Wendt's use of sexual imagery. Pepesa's teacher, Mrs Brown is without children (the horse without the stallion as the children see it), the doctor in *Flying-Fox is a Freedom Tree* 'knows the female biology from books only' (p. 105). In 'Virgin-wise' there is the conflict between sexuality and restrictive papalagi values; 'it sin lust after woman-meat; it sin to come so preacher say on Sunday', although the sexuality of the story teller is in itself an unreality (p. 147). Susanna, Pepesa's wife, and her parents use Susanna's sexuality to trap Pepesa into marriage; her lovemaking is motivated by economic and status gains. The marriage of the Trusts, the papalagi manager and his wife, is sterile, devoid of communication and open enjoyment of sexuality.

Wendt suggests that the Samoan, in adopting papalagi values as his own becomes a castrated man. In Paovale's thoughts his

father's challenge exposes the sterile sameness and servility of Paovale's existence.

you, my son, are a little man, a starched-clothed Government employee worthy only of \$60 a month ... you may have God, son, but you're a little man. A small man, weak even down there where a man should be able to stand up and fight valiantly. When was the last time you sharpened your weapon? Poor, son, just a pitifully shrivelled-up banana. (p. 89)

Sexuality is an assertion of identity, of manhood, but men such as Paovale have lost this assertion of self.

On the other hand Pili, the pint-sized devil, is his own man in that he refuses to be 'polite'. He is an outlaw in the sense that he lives 'his (own) law'. Pili, appropriately, is a man with a large and well used weapon. 'He was, like grandfather, a law unto himself, but unlike grandfather, a criminal, a complete outsider' (p. 41). He, like his grandfather, is not the Polynesian noble savage, but trained in the ways of his grandfather, he holds in contempt the effeminate papalagi values. Significantly he is a 'devil' in a pint-sized frame. Physically he is a dwarf, but his soul is unrestrained by the papalagi or Samoan values he rejects. He is a dwarf in so far as he is different and does not fit the mould of ordinary men. But his real manhood lies in his refusal to accept that restraining mould, his refusal to be other than himself; he is ultimately responsible only to himself.

This is the sort of identity which Wendt ultimately explores. There can be no true identity in either Samoan or Papalagi cultures. Ultimate identity is an existential acceptance of responsibility to self – an assertion of one's own individual integrity.

Tagata presents us with a powerful image of the existential man. He, too, is a dwarf physically, unfitting and deformed in the eyes of usual men. But it is the usual men who are dwarfs in spirit, while Tagata accepts responsibility for his own identity, his own destiny. He realises the absurdity of life. 'Life ... is ridiculous like a dwarf is ridiculous' (p. 141). Tagata can assert the goodness of life because he possesses the freedom inherent in an acceptance of the absurdity of life and in an acceptance of the inevitability and finality of death. It is Tagata's laughter in death which gives him

ultimate freedom; he acts as the 'eagle', true to self, asserting personal choice which makes meaning of absurdity, exercising man's ultimate personal choice ... the right to dispose of one's self.

'Pepesa, I am right there inside the death-goddess which no-one believes in anymore, and her sacred channel is all lava' (p. 141). Death is reality; the lava is implacable, it is the hard timeless reality to which Tagata returns for his strength; it is an ultimate truth or reality owing nothing to man.

The question of judgement is an important issue in this sense. Tagata and Pepesa are their own judges, judging the self by their own rules; ultimately this is the only real judgement – an integrity to self. This view makes a mockery of Pepesa's judgement at the hands of the 'black-dress' papalagi judge. The 'black-dress' judgement has no relevance, no meaning to Pepesa. 'I want to know who the Black dress is' (p. 128). Its judgement is alien to Pepesa, its values true only for itself. Yet neither does the judge's 'truth' hold for him. Without his wig he is human after all, naked and stumbling; the system of justice is a pretence like the clothing he puts on. Furthermore, Pepesa is not on trial for his crime against property. He is tried instead for his belief in himself ... the judge uses his own religious belief, which can only hold true for himself, as a yardstick by which to measure Pepesa's worth. Pepesa realises the absurdity inherent in the terms of the judgement – 'you were the one who told me who I am' (p. 131). The judge cannot and will not understand.

In two other stories Wendt explores the distinction between existential freedom and its corruption, anarchy. Captain Full, Strongest Man Alive, is a corruption of the free man, a parody of Tagata, Pepesa and Pili. His freedom is without integrity, an anarchic freedom not an existential freedom based on real awareness of man's predicament. So too in 'Virgin wise'; the story teller extols sexual freedom, but is himself a prisoner of sexual fantasy. He is unable to face and accept reality; sexuality here is not an assertion of life.

In drawing heavily on an existentialist framework in his assertion of identity, Wendt's writing goes beyond the concerns of the local. His stature as a writer lies in the fact that he writes of more

than the Samoan or third world predicament; his characters are representative of a broader perspective – the state of man. Perhaps man's growth (technologically and culturally) is inevitably toward a realisation of his alienation, a realisation submerged in earlier more 'primitive' cultures. Wendt's concern is with that alienation.

## NOTES

1. Marjorie Crocombe, 'Samoa's Albert Wendt: Poet and Author' in *Mana Annual of Creative Writing* (Suva: South Pacific Creative Arts Society, 1978), pp. 45-7. (Interview)
2. Albert Wendt, *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1974), p. 141. All further references are to this edition and will be included in the text.

# Wilson Harris

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## INTERVIEW

Michel Fabre interviewed Wilson Harris in January 1979.

*How do you consider Palace of the Peacock nowadays in the context of your literary production as a whole?*

*Palace of the Peacock* has for me a very important place in the context of the work I have done over the past twenty years and in particular in the context of the first nine novels up to *Ascent to Ormai*.

In part, I suppose, I relate to it within a ground of compelling emotion. It comes out of my first major confrontation with, and immersion in, the heartland of Guyana. I was a young land surveyor who

had come from the coastlands where I was born into an interior beyond my wildest dreams. It took me many years in the wake of many other expeditions to write this book.

Perhaps it may be of interest to mention that the names of the crew in the novel were adopted from a *real* party I led on that first expedition. The apparently allegorical significances in those names are no invention of mine: Carroll (the singing boatman), Jennings (the engineer), the Da Silva twins (mercurial characters), Wishrop (a climber who scales a cliff as if roped to the web of heaven), Vigilance (the lookout, the eye of the crew, peeled for hidden rocks and shapes in the dangerous water).

*Palace* was the fourth novel I wrote but my first published novel. I abandoned and destroyed the first three except that in the late stages of the third book I felt the beginnings of a shudder of pace (like a turbulence or stream that grips and tugs at a boat) within the language. I find I have no other way to describe an intuitive force that became the summons to embark at last on *Palace of the Peacock*. I can only describe it by saying that the words were alive and consistent with what I deeply knew and felt; the pace I had discovered, however strange, was real, it was a generation of rhythm that seemed to belong to the long immersion I had had in a landscape of rapids, waterfalls, of smooth calm interludes and reaches that could prove suddenly deceptive and precipitous, a landscape of brooding rain forest and great savannahs alive with ghosts and waving grasses, solitary trees, a landscape that threw up startling cliffs, an area of conflicting cultures reaching into the South Americas, into exploiter and exploited from pre-Columbian times to the twentieth century, whom the crew of the novel symbolized in its representatives of many races, a world of illusive El Dorado, cities of gold and of god that were dangerous as well as marvellous potential of the imagination.

Looking back at *Palace* I would say I was intuitively involved in an architectural or architectonic theme. There was an element of paradox in that this theme was a dream of inner space as well as a concrete metaphorical composition. Paradox is there also in the way the novel also has a curious intimate rapport with the conquistadorial character Donne in order to overthrow subtly — without prejudice if possible, without setting up in turn biases of revenge — violations rooted in conquest built into the family of mankind; and in overthrowing such violations to begin to move away from *imposition* into a form that immerses itself in living fragile texture, neglected tones, neglected ingredients of place, hinges of light, etc., etc. All this is profoundly pertinent I believe to the recovery of buried sensibility native to oneself, native to one's other half, one's

exploited kith and kin, in the very ground of lost cultures and of the 'world's night'.

*Which one is your favourite novel, among the many you have written?*

I find it difficult to pick a favourite among the novels I have written for it seems to me that everything I have done constitutes a growing unfinished body of work and each instalment, so to speak, could not exist without what has gone before. But if I were compelled to make say two choices I think they would be *Palace of the Peacock* and *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (which has a sequel called *The Tree of the Sun*).

*Would you define Palace of the Peacock as a 'South American' novel, not only in terms of locale and sensibilities but in terms of 'marvellous realism' and what passes for the characteristics of the South American novel?*

I do feel a certain kinship with the South American and the Latin American novel. In part it is setting, in part it may be antecedents. My antecedents are mixed. Some are Arawak or Amerindian, others European and African. The concept of 'marvellous realism' constitutes for me an alchemical pilgrimage, nigredo, albedo, cauda pavonis. The search for the lapis or the marvellous stone is a ceaseless adventure within the self and without the self in natures and beings that are undervalued or that have been eclipsed or imprisoned by models of conquest.

*Do you consider yourself a Guyanese, an English or a South American writer?*

The honest reply is to say I am all three by tradition and history. Guyana is in South America and possesses a complex and challenging inheritance that relates to South America and to the Caribbean. I have always greatly and spontaneously admired from my youth English poetry such as the work of Donne, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Coleridge and Hopkins. My relationship to the English language is a peculiarly native one in that the language belongs to me and is also a medium in which images from cultures other than English arrive and alter narrative preconceptions to enrich a body of associations in depth. This I believe is the case with all the major European languages, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, that are now native to the South Americas and to the Caribbean.

*Do you consider the quest of El Dorado, i.e. the pursuit of inaccessible material wealth, a major theme in the novel?*

El Dorado is, I believe, a theme that could be transformed into a quest for wholeness. In such a context it may serve to repudiate the hubris of conquest, and the legacies of conquest that govern the imagination, by asserting that institutions and images which seem total and absolute in character are partial. In confessing to their partiality they lend themselves to dialogue with other apparently alien parts, that masquerade as wholes, and thus to a complex of real and genuine change in which no part assumes absolute sovereignty over the rest. Wholeness can never be entirely achieved and therefore it rouses the imagination to release itself from monoliths of complacency or cruel bias. I believe El Dorado can be explored as a caveat of this order. It is the city of gold that mutates into a god to apprise us of our limitations in order paradoxically to equip us for ceaseless creativity or movement into relationships of flexible parts, horizons, living contrasts.

*In Palace of the Peacock, death appears as spiritual regeneration and the religious imagery is prevalent. Can one decipher the final scene as a parable of a Christian epiphany or did you have different intentions in mind when writing it, however?*

The final scene in *Palace of the Peacock* is, I hope, a kind of Christian epiphany but it subsists as well on the Amerindian psyche. In Amerindian legend the Arawak zemi is a kind of icon that confesses to an inner space or inner body within the costume or investiture it wears, thus a hidden equation may exist between conqueror and conquered in the American context to alert us sensuously to the unfathomable capacity of Christ to uncover the past, to regenerate the past, to transform violations inflicted in his name and to spark into being a new creation in the light of the living body of the present.

*The seven stages of the journey to the interior can be seen as those of the alchemical process from nigredo to cauda pavonis. Did you pattern the narrative with that comparison in mind when you wrote the story?*

I can say quite honestly that I was not aware of the alchemical process when I wrote *Palace of the Peacock*. But over the years in research and reading I have become convinced that an intuitive equation exists. In



alchemy one striking issue is the matter of psychical projections upon the world, projections of fear, of beauty, of hate, of harmony, etc., etc., from the individual psyche upon nature. On the surface this is anthropomorphic but in depth, I feel, it confirms man's essential and enigmatic relationship with the qualitative mystery of creation, qualities of emotion, god-like, animal and human, in worlds that are made from primordial elements and forces that inevitably arouse various qualities akin to distinctive feeling or emotion. Mathematics itself is an art, a gift of perception, of grace, of intuition. Or so it seems to me. Creation therefore springs from a qualitative and primordial base that releases conflicting tones and feelings that cannot be wholly reconciled or erased from objective practice however apparently clinical that practice, however apparently austere. Creativity embarks on unceasing therapy, an unceasing quest for the reconciliation of alien universes or parts of unfathomable genesis. That the individual imagination, in all its frailty, engages in the qualitative mystery of origins is, it seems to me, a hopeful omen of enduring capacity in creation itself to relate to its vulnerable parts in the midst of furies, man-made or nature-made, that seem unhuman and overwhelming at times.

*How do you stand in relationship to Conrad and his vision of 'savagery' in Heart of Darkness?*

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in my judgement, is a great novel because it brings home the tormenting issue of form, the necessity for a change of form, if the modern novel is to sustain heterogeneous contents without one culture suppressing or exterminating the other or hypocritically claiming to be liberal while maintaining its fixtures of bias. Conrad's European inheritance was a novel-form that came by and large from homogeneous situations in which ruling images or institutions of communication, geared to consenting classes and common values, seemed natural, beautiful and right. In *Heart of Darkness* he became aware of the partiality of such absolute rule and the implicit polarizations not only in Europe but glaringly in European empires around the globe. That awareness set up meaningful distortions in his vision of Africa. He was unable to do more than bring the novel-form to a frontier on which the necessity resided for a change in inter-relationships and imagery within the narrative tool he used. Nevertheless though he stopped there it was a significant achievement. The fact that he was able to disclose the bias of homogeneous cultural form within patterns of

conquest, masquerading as light, tested him to the core for his own fears of security, the way he had himself been conditioned and educated, were at stake. The issue of form is a formidable one. Imaginative art is form, complex form. Without the change in form new content is invalid and that is why protest novels or protest media or protest politics do little to change the texture of a civilization or alter the habits of power, of territorial imperative, as it is called, in any profound way.

*I believe your style is somewhat disconcerting to the reader who approaches Palace of the Peacock with preconceived ideas about what a plot and a novel should be. Were you conscious of that difficulty and did you attempt to create a style that would be capable of allowing experience on a direct, sensuous level as well as providing glimpses of the metaphysical?*

As I explained in reply to questions 1 & 2 my arrival into *Palace of the Peacock* came from a deep-seated concentration upon materials I needed to immerse myself in that confronted me in the Guyanas. I felt the necessity to do more than describe that world. I needed to uncover it in some degree, to recover what had been apparently lost, to see it from within as well as from without. It was this interwoven necessity that triggered off the kind of style in which the book was written. I never thought it would prove disconcerting for as I wrote it it seemed to me basically true to an inner body of complex fact that has continued to assert itself in different ways in successive novels.

*How do you think this tension between the sensuous and the metaphysical can be achieved and maintained stylistically?*

I think this kind of tension resides in an exploratory sensation that all images are partial and therefore they imply a thrust backwards towards hidden wholes and forwards towards new wholes that are in themselves, in the past and in the future, unfinished shapes of reality. Why a writer should find himself committed to such a process is unanswerable. It isn't a popular process and yet it seems to me vital to human community. Perhaps I reveal an obsession in saying this but it is an obsession I think that relates to curious powers that can help the individual imagination to be and to obey impulses of otherness beyond the historical prejudices of the generation to which he belongs.

*How do you react to the publication of Palace of the Peacock in France?*

I am pleased that my novel is to appear in the French language. For this brings it, I hope, a little closer to a great tradition from which writers as diverse as Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Proust, Balzac, Flaubert, Aime Césaire, Camara Laye, Claude Simon, St John Perse, Genet and Robbe-Grillet have come. It is the remarkable combination of intuition, concentration, profound imaginative truth allied to a quest for new form in poem and novel, that gives the French tradition an inner momentum that flowers in individual works of great originality.

MICHEL FABRE

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## The Reception of *Palace of the Peacock* in Paris

*Le Palais du Paon*, the French version of *Palace of the Peacock*, was published in Paris by Les Éditions des Autres in May 1979. With the help of Hena Maes-Jelinek and Claude Vercey, Jean-Pierre Durix, now a professor of English literature at the University of Dijon, completed an accurate and inspired translation and contributed a short preface to the 164-page volume, emphasizing the Guyanese blend of cultures as well as some of the difficulties the reader, unused to 'the destruction of the classical conception of a character as a distinct and separate entity', was likely to encounter. He ended on the novel's final vision: 'The windows of the place are no longer material eyes with their limited perception. They have become those of the peacock with their innumerable variations, perspectives of otherness that open onto the infinite.'

French reviewers were thus somewhat guided in their appreciation of Harris's novel. Moreover, the authors of the reviews which appeared in two leading literary magazines, *Le Monde* and *Le Magazine Littéraire*, were quite conversant with Harris's work.

In *Le Magazine Littéraire* (Sept. 1979, p. 8), Hena Maes-Jelinek analyzed the ethno-cultural background of the novel, concentrating on the psychological impact of the setting upon the protagonists. Yet, more than half of her article focussed upon the relationship between the 'spiritual' narrator and Donne, and the process of resurrection as integration into universal consciousness, the equation of the end and a new beginning. This was enhanced, as she made clear, by Harris's symbolism and the ambivalence of the figure of the peacock, which also 'suggest human vanity and the metamorphoses men are capable of'. It is a symbol of wholeness, as well. The article made it clear that 'creation also is re-acknowledgement of otherness, linked to the liberation of the self. Such is the essence of this splendid novel and of the liberating art of Wilson Harris'.

*Le Monde* granted the review the choicest space in its literary section, 'Le Monde des Livres' (which appears every Thursday), i.e. the illustrated cartouche on the left side of the inside page, which signals outstanding contributions to the literary world. (The drawing was a portrait of Harris by Berenice Clive.) 'The Quest of Wilson Harris' briefly evoked Harris's career and the scope of his reputation as an introduction to the review proper, subtitled 'An Invitation to Mysticism' by the editor. The reviewer, Michel Fabre, attempted to make the world of *Palace* more familiar to the French reader by alluding to the film 'Aguirre', which had been shown in Paris with considerable success, to Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*, and to James Joyce and his manner of working with language. An implicit reference was made to Rimbaud through the phrase, 'l'alchimie du verbe', used here to hint at 'an active and concrete process'. A subsequent issue of *Le Monde* mentioned the book as one of the best published in 'Littératures Etrangères' and called Harris, 'the best Caribbean novelist of today'.

Interestingly enough, the third longest review appeared in *La Libre Belgique* (23/24 May 1979). This very laudatory piece by 'S. de V.' went into rather considerable detail in retracing Harris's career: 'born on August 21, 1921, at New Amsterdam, British Guyana ... nominated several times for the Nobel Prize', as well as in establishing, for instance, that in the novel *Schomburg* evokes Richard Schomburg, who explored Guyana from 1840 to 1844 and was 'the first important European

influence there' — this information having been gleaned from Durix's introduction. The reviewer for *Le Soir de Bruxelles* (8 August 1979) spent more time summing up the most vivid moments of the narrative, concluding that 'the crew all die inexorably like in the Aguirre expedition filmed by Werner Herzog'. He found that *Palace*, the first French translation of a 'remarkable Guyanese writer', reflected not only on 'the domination of white over black but on the death instinct inherent in man'. *Nord-Eclair* (31 May 1979) found the novel 'astonishing, and surprising in many ways'. Beyond its possible exotic appeal, it was 'a true novel, with a brilliant style and unique metaphors' which had deservedly been compared to Rimbaud's 'Bateau Ivre'. *La République du Centre* (4 May 1979) noted Harris's career as a surveyor and the world-wide reputation of the novelist, hitherto practically unknown in France. Although *L'Aurore* (29 May 1979) only mentioned the publication of the book, *La Liberté* (17 August 1979) managed to give, in a single, long, Proust-like sentence, an impression of the extraordinary vegetal background of the novel, 'as much an adventure story as an initiating quest for El Dorado, as much an ethnographical novel as an oneiric leap'. 'P.F.', in *La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest* (26 June 1979), mentioned the novelist's nationality and background but dwelt almost exclusively on the dreamlike qualities of the book: 'the quest for some inner reality, to be unearthed from the innermost depths of memory. And what memory! It is a poetic accomplishment'. In an article entitled 'Ecrivain Guyanais' *La Dépêche du Midi* spoke of this 'superb novel, the first of a Guyana series'. Writing for *Le Méridional* (17 June 1979), Alex Mattalia admitted that he had first been disconcerted by the slinness of the volume. Then he had found himself plunged headlong into 'a sort of poetic reality ... vehiculating authentic images, bearing dreams and symbols'. He concluded that 'the book is sometimes disconcerting but always interesting, not easy to read but engrossing'. *L'Indépendant* (June 1979) mostly quoted the opinion of a British critic, claiming, again, that *Palace* can sustain comparison with 'The Drunken Boat'.

Other reviews have undoubtedly appeared which have not yet come to my attention. What one can gather from those available is the earnestness with which the novel has been approached. Its 'exotic' appeal might have been played up (and it is probable that many reviewers did not differentiate between Guyana and French Guyana, either out of ignorance or because they were more interested in a geographical landscape than in political boundaries), but only once is the exotic singled out. On the whole, the specific qualities of Harris's writing,

although they were found disconcerting by Alex Mantalia and although other reviews in dailies seem to equate 'dream-like' and 'disconcerting', were not considered a hindrance for what one might call the 'general reader'. Perhaps this is because the tradition of French writing has always made room for innovation, even when disconcerting. Or perhaps this is because French reviewers are fairly conversant with avant-garde novelistic techniques. At any rate, the *début* of *Palace of the Peacock* was such that one can predict that Wilson Harris will soon find an audience here.

## Cyril Dabydeen

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### THE KING HAS NO CLOTHES

Limp and bedraggled he walks  
through the day  
without worry or work-troubled

he struts out with a halloo  
into the hearts of trees  
entering the nest secrets  
of a bramble life

telling the world of the coming  
to an end of all things  
only the ground swirls  
beneath his squirrel-feet

and the birds about-and-about  
pick up the refrain  
with a crackle-and-crackle

in his woodpecker's ears  
he takes note from a bark-edge  
being firm

he begins with  
a turn-around  
and all is well  
until judgement comes

his eyes peel open an apocalypse  
he rides out a horseman  
into the dark-and-darkness world  
of the disappearing horizon.

## ALL THE ELEMENTS

In this variegated landscape  
my life turns topsy-turvy.  
I notice the sun once again  
in its chameleonic phase

I quickly ask for respite  
I am arid in body's heat  
I wait for the downpour at my sides

I drip under a tarpaulin  
I bend and quiver  
from the cambium-chambers of my heart

A growl and hiss. I wait with dim frenzy.  
I listen to the buzz in the fevered shape  
of night. I am the dried pelt —

it is this cave that I fear most  
I am still in the hinterland,

sun at my side, rain my skin  
tongue slaked

all rampant beginnings.

## HOW TO SAVE A LIFE

This is the night when  
the lungs are intact  
the heart is no longer  
in frenzy. Bones do not  
walk out by themselves

Together we meander along  
the corridor of the skin  
make designs all across  
the body

I offer you solace  
with words carved  
entrails coiled in.  
You give me a tame  
life in exchange

I listen at the navel  
for the beasts that still  
rage, that keep knocking

against flesh



## PARTNERSHIP

I continue to give you arms & legs.  
Your body holds out against dismemberment.  
In the world of the constant grimace, I offer  
bandages without so much as an apology.

We continue our old game, looking on  
from shadow sockets, still exchanging  
lungs & hearts.

I put my trophies in a bag  
and sling it across my shoulder

Time for the wandering again.  
I leave you behind with a handful of roses.  
Not long after you follow —  
stretching out false limbs  
with octopus-arms to embrace me.

I keep looking back, waiting  
for the sun to enter. Your tentacles  
are still all around me; I am twisted,  
confined —

about to disappear from life altogether.  
Your laughter continues to keep my bare bones  
firmly on the ground. I hear distantly  
the thunder-clap of another disaster.

## A Continental Romance

Years later it was agreed: she murdered him in Spéracèdes and claimed the ticket. It was on a sunny day, just after the vendange and everyone was happy, if tired: there was to be a big feast in the village that night. The tourists would see the dead man as a sort of sacrifice to the grapes, but the locals took things in their stride: they had no thirst for mystery, for symbolism; they sought confirmation, only, that things were as they were. The man's name was Philpot, murdered by ... well, in the presence of his wife, who inherited the ticket. The long trek South had had an effect on her; she was a bit confused about the sequence of events, but this worked to her advantage and earned her the authority of widowhood. She had paid her bride-price by having walked from London to the Alpes Maritimes; walked, yes, that's how she thought of it. She felt better for being the worse for it (we don't know this, but never mind). Her new neighbours then gathered round her outside Georges' café where it had all happened (some, admittedly, at a respectful distance) and assured her of eventual vindication, should rumours be put about. Then they advised her to rest before the feast.

'I'm not what you think,' Philpot had said on wooing her... (perhaps her predecessor, perhaps her contemporary, difficult to sort out). He threw it out like bait, in a lake known to be swarming, to tempt any passing fish. This was in the din and bustle of Paddington station, so naturally he couldn't be sure if the catch would be to his liking. Having grown indiscriminate of late, he was again anxious to salvage a little pride. (The bait, held casually in his hand, was a wife's train ticket to the South of France.) Perhaps to mask his uneasiness, he became somewhat rhetorical — this verbally inarticulate man — striking attitudes of self-aggrandizement, of self-pity: his environment was against him, he explained to all of a human curiosity, but his had been a life with memories, memories that would endure the retirement. He had fished, he'd have them know, in better seas.

The passing wife (water-current detectors functioning) like a fish who had often nibbled and got away with it (absent gill-slit, damaged esophagus notwithstanding) was confident of being pulled along by this particular line, without further danger to herself.

Philpot was conscious of his retiring-&-taking-up-fishing status, waiting on Paddington station for a wife to accompany him to the South of France. He was a philanthropist, a benefactor. He had already, unilaterally, conferred on all possible catch, the dignity of warm blooded womanhood. In case too many be tempted, he decided not to reveal the existence of the villa in Spéracèdes till the wife showed that she was worthy, had mended the ways of a life-time, and could present in retirement, a youthful, new Mediterranean version of herself.

His confidence growing, he boarded the train early — he would not be trifled with by a missing wife — and looked down from a First Class window on the approaching hopefuls. He was not anxious, he was merely wondering if the creature would be a woman of imagination, able to rise to the occasion, to match his risk: would she be wearing a rosette? Carrying a book? Ah, let her sort it out. Let her come and identify him. He would approach no more wives in his retirement. It was a matter of dignity.

He was alone with the person opposite — she had dispatched her cuckold to the bar for a coke: he liked her style — he told her what was on his mind. She was enigmatic, as if she already knew. He told her he would approach no more wives for his retirement. He would merely lay his assets, as it were, as now, on the imaginary table between them. 'You will not have been battered by me', he reasoned. And she seemed to perk up, alert but unafraid. She was the sort of wife to whom he could later say, 'Wrap this rag of a life round your ... *cough cough, wink wink* ... self.' Naturally, he would say that only when they were well South, clear of England, in a strange place where he wouldn't be thought of as being a snivelling cuckold.

The Guard interrupted them. Philpot gave the Guard his wife's ticket instead of his own, to show the (comparatively empty) compartment that a sense of *play*, of *finesse*, would survive the single-minded literalness of a train journey. The lady took note and went one further, offering her two tickets to the Guard: they were hers and hers alone, she said. She just wished to create some *space* round herself, when she travelled. The fellow took it in his stride and punched both her tickets without comment, versed in the ways of the travelling aristocracy.

Then she was frank with Philpot: he was wrong about her: she loved

her husband. Cuckolding him hadn't been easy for her. (So, she'd been reading his thoughts: surely, he hadn't been thinking aloud!) No, it was something ... something she had to work at. Mostly, indeed, she found it a little tedious. But the memories that survived, well, they had to be checked out for their accuracy.

He could capitalize on his luck and transform her into a figure of legend — the lady of three tickets who drove men to distraction (and exhaustion) on the London-Dover line. Or he could demand more for his ticket. Fight a battle. Kill two rivals. He was prepared for that. In his bag was a used bush-jacket; and the revolutionary phrase which he now had off by heart in seven languages, would assure Press coverage.

But the cuckold returned from the bar with coke and rolls, and cringed at the lady's side, violating her space. It was clear that she expected Philpot to intervene, but it pleased him to see this as an opportunity deliberately lost, and her small cloud of disapproval soon passed to admiration.

Crossing Paris is never a good idea: with an extra ticket. From the *Gare du Nord* to the *Gare de Lyon*, a man needs a companion to blame for his loss of sanity. Without one, he feels cheated, foreign. Philpot had visions of being mugged for his ticket: there were predators everywhere who ought never to have been released from their film sets. But it was all in vain, when he emerged unmolested, he felt undervalued. What was the point in this life, of having an extra ticket?

Another wife unknown to him, who had eluded him on Paddington station, still dangled at the end of his now imaginary line; and, indeed, she too gave up the foolish pretence of being a fish; but she remained out of sight, confident (we like to think).

Ignorant of all this, Philpot amused himself. He gave himself up to the old fantasy of travellers Southbound: *it is cold and wet in Paris. Seven or eight o'clock in the evening. Dark. You are in the North. On this trip South, it will happen. Walking to your couchette, you glimpse through a gently-closing door, a bare arm settling down between white sheets. You approach your own couchette in anticipation ... Ah, yes, your train romance will yet be written. Next morning, you begin to wake up to painterly skies, tropical light, the Mediterranean. You look for palm trees and find instead beautiful people getting off in twos and threes at little stations along the way, filmic. And one of the beautiful people is on*

your arm, leading you to a pavement café across the road — traffic on the right and all that. *Soleil ou L'ombre?* the Patron asks, offering two types of table. Philpot would, of course, go native with a *pastis* and order a glass of red wine for the lady.

And they weren't even in Spéracèdes yet!

When he got to Spéracèdes, Philpot took a table outside Georges' café — a mini-attraction now that Georges has blown his brains out — and waited (back turned to Peymeinade, to Cannes, he was not a tourist) to be approached by his lady of taste and breeding.

She came eventually, carrying a copy of *Nice Matin* (the rosette? the book? Ah, very good) and, as if trying to establish an alibi, insisted on giving a full account of her trip. Philpot ordered a glass of wine to silence her.

Ignoring the wine, she continued with the evidence, of the trip to Dover in a lorry, a shuddering monster that was alive, obscene, undignified to climb in and out of; then the green bus at Dover, green bus to the Ferry; and of getting her way in France, speaking French when they wanted her to do otherwise; and the impossibility of getting a lift out of Calais (when, eventually, she got one it was *into* Calais, as she had been stranded, unknowing, at the docks) as she sent the potential rapists packing; and of having to spend the night at Boulogne — a long, long story —; and being picked up the next day by a Martiniquen, well into the afternoon, on his way to Rouen. He drove her out of Rouen and onto the Paris road and made a sign saying PARIS, which you couldn't read from more than three yards; though a young chap who liked older women and was going to Dijon managed to read it somehow; and it was, she said, so far to Dijon.

In the café, regulars drank to the memory of Georges, and from the thirst of the vendange; and to the two widows who had lost their husbands on this very day two years running, and paid no attention to Philpot and his wife.

Philpot sat sipping, imagining her floundering, drowning in wine; but she spouted like a whale, in her element. The young chap, you know, the one to Dijon woke her up in the middle of the night and asked if she wanted to use the bathroom. They had stopped at a service station and afterwards she declined the restaurant because the bathroom had upset her, embarrassed her: it had obviously been built by a man who wanted to humiliate women. And after Dijon? She couldn't remember... She remembered a room for the night. Next morning, a street corner, a sign

saying LYON more legibly than the PARIS sign had said PARIS. Then a lift into a field of sweetcorn. Yes, just for that, the corn; he was weird. Then there was the Nazi who picked her up and put her down in the middle of the Autoroute when he discovered her opinions; but she was not armed, she had to let him go. She had no idea where she was then, till the signs for Avignon started coming up; and then Aix, and she knew she was getting warm. Nice and Cannes made her think of yachts and wine; Grasse, of perfume. At Grasse, they told her of Georges' café in Spéracèdes, of Georges who had blown his brains out, and of the sadist who awaited her with a spare ticket.

She had not yet drunk the wine nor paid any attention to the ticket which Philpot put, casually, on the table. So, always seeking to maintain his reputation for nonchalance, for finesse (they were in Midi country, after all); to show that he was not a literal fellow, or worse, an old man in a hurry, Philpot casually put the ticket in his mouth and ate it. We will never know what his thoughts were; all we know (for the eye-witnesses saw nothing) from people who weren't there, is that *something happened* when the lady tried to recover her ticket.

Did she kill him? Ah, well, it was the day of the *vendange*, and a few are expected to die about then. It's a good omen, it helps the grapes. That he died then, there and in that way, was taken as a sign — a little one, like Georges' suicide — that the village was not entirely forgotten by its gods; nor did it have to bastardize itself (like St. Tropez with its breasts or Cannes with its Film Festival) to be authentic.

And the lady?

It is said that she settled down in Spéracèdes, happily, for ever.

## Hurricane David: the skeleton of a survival tale

On Wednesday 29 August 1979 the mountainous island of Dominica (29 miles  $\times$  16 miles) was devastated by hurricane David.

We, personally, had been seriously warned. My sister telephoned from St Vincent the day before to urge us to leave our little stone house in the valley, surrounded by water, and 'go up higher'. Like us, she feared the probability of our drowning more than injury from the tremendous winds — though she no doubt had better advice than we did on the strength and course of the hurricane. Meteorological radio reports had prepared us for a strike further south — Barbados. Later we learned that the original force of this hurricane was about 300 mph, not the 180 mph stated officially, but that US aviation scientists had 'seeded' it to bring down the speed ... well. Indeed had we gone up higher, we might have suffered a crueller fate. The new house we had in mind lost its roof (like ours) and was damaged badly. By staying in our little house (built 1830, tremendously thick stone walls) we definitely saved it and ourselves.

The onslaught started with a lot of rain in the morning; then the winds struck; no thunder. It was an attack by an evil giant on the sleeping beauty; worse than the bombardment of England because it was so inescapable and lasted so long (over six hours); the shattering noise of gnarled fingers deliberately tearing out the roofing burst overhead.

After a while we had no cover up above save the thin ceiling-board, which began to split. Floods came into the house slantwise; our bed was soaking. Later we took refuge in Robbie's tiny room, which provided a patch of roof. The boy had gone to the Carib Reserve for his 'last week of holiday'. We were alone save for our pets: two dogs, a father and a mother cat, and their two kittens; out in the field two goats were tethered, potential victims of flying sharp galvanize. The poor animals were confused, and seemed with their eyes to blame us for the dreadful change in their lives.

We were alone together, and since we had wanted to die together, we were not afraid. However we struggled to save the animals and the house, pressing a mattress against the bay window with our soaking bodies to fight the increasing fierceness. A major part of the roof had been cast into the millpond by the winds, together with our only spade and various household implements which we only discovered days afterwards. The horizontal rain continued to batter us with a deepthroated roar; we were surrounded by swirling waters and mud which came into the carport (also our working and eating shelter): this breached itself under our front door!

Then on the afternoon of the 29th, the wind and rain stopped completely as the centre of the hurricane David passed over us. Half an hour later, with a change of direction, wind and rain started up again wildly and continued for another couple of exhausting hours.

Meanwhile our old car, brakes on and in gear, was lifted by wind and floods to jam against a stubborn little bush. All of it was found water- and mud-logged, and up to now, three weeks later, its restoration is incomplete. The manual labour we had to perform was terrific. Aside from baling and mopping like shipwrecked people, we had to worry about eating and feeding the pets when morning came. Our battery radio worked; but all island communications — lights, telephone and local radio — were cut off.

Then it was daylight. What a sight! We were, it seemed, living in an entirely different land. All the green was gone; the mountains which had seemed so blue and round were now harsh peaks with dead stark trees stripped of leaves. Our stream had changed its course and now ran on the other side of the house, between carport and drive way, which was non-existent — a tangle of fallen trees. Aside from the volumes of water around us the island of Dominica was a petrified island. Yet it was strangely beautiful. The stillness was absolute. Not a bird to be heard. Later we learned through Radio Antilles that over 90% of the banana crop and most of the coconuts were gone. We ourselves could see the unclimbable 80-foot high coconut trees uprooted and lying like strewn giant matches within a few yards of our house. The great 150 year old chimney made of lovely bricks of the ruined boiling house was destroyed. The ruins stood there bare with their walls breached in one place. Old orange trees were uprooted and avocado trees and breadfruit trees torn up. Everything was brownish, as if denuded by a forest fire.

For the first two days we saw nobody. We lived mostly on the things we picked up from the ground — oranges, avocados, coconuts, and rather



green breadfruit. But meanwhile, we had to steel ourselves to bear Hurricane Frederick on the night of 31 August.

We were probably closer to death by drowning under the wet violence of Frederick than under tempestuous David. Floods of rain came in a straight downpour and we had no protection. We were damp and discouraged. I looked for the goats — they stood quietly in the water-swamped fields, miraculously alive with coconut trees and galvanize around them. The dogs and cats were extremely gloomy. We just bore the floods as stoically as we could, working against water, longing for morning; but the day dawned rainy. And we had no roof. Our food was very low. The avocados, sunscorched on one side, were rotting. Likewise the oranges. It seemed that one of us would have to make a difficult two-mile journey to Roseau, over landslides and tree trunks. Helicopters had begun to appear. Some flew low, and we longed for them to drop just one tiny packet of food when we waved. But they were going on to those in Morne Prosper, Wotton Waven and Trafalgar where the need was greater. We heard messages bearing our names (from abroad) but we could not then reply.

On the third day after hurricane David, I went to town; Robert stayed to work and guard the house. All along the road people were searching for roofing to mend their spoiled houses with. We needed our own badly. Just after Frederick, we began our terrible labour of dragging galvanize sheets which had flown through the air or gone downstream. Robert wore his beautiful English gloves, and I wore my white Government House gloves to protect my fingers which were already chipped and cut. He took one area, I took another. Little by little we dragged back parts of our roof; after a bath in the new stream, I dressed as neatly as possible (some of our clothes were soaked, but O glory! our books were relatively untouched); then I set off up-and-down the once straight road to poor old Roseau, to look for food. I carried an empty leather bag and a haversack. The few young people I passed greeted me warmly. They were going in the opposite direction. I saw the roofs of new Emshall houses off. Bath Estate Big House deroofed. All the splendid new homes above St Arment reduced to nothing. Johnstown (Bath Estate new housing) partially destroyed. The St Arment road impassable.

Alas, Roseau, my poor birthplace! It was in a horrible state. The British Navy had turned to and shown a fine example by cleaning what they could of the debris-ridden streets. The Anglican Church: only three walls left. Roofs and walls had been torn off both new and old buildings, yet sometimes tiny flimsy houses were undamaged. Jean Rhys's old home,

with its two coats of new paint and mammoth mango tree, was standing proudly. I sat on a step and wrote letters to my two sisters, which I hastily posted in a pillar box outside the damaged post office. I later learned that the GPO was abandoned and the letter box waterlogged. My loving efforts were in vain, and I knew they were worrying. On my next walk into town I sent them and four other people cables. Later I discovered that they had both sent us money, and so had Cousin Rufus in St Kitts, while Adele Emery may have had a premonition — she sent a gift dated 27 August. But on that first visit to town I could not spend any money. All banks and shops were closed for some days. I went to see my cousin Rosalind Volney. She was out, at the Red Cross. Across from her home there was a long queue of highly respectable people lined up to receive their rations, like London bombed-out persons. I went to see Rosalind V at the Red Cross and got a few things to eat and a pair of old tennis shoes for the hazardous route march back.

We learned that over 60% of our Dominican population were homeless, and that 40 citizens had been killed. Still no news of Robbie. Only four houses in Goodwill had emerged unscathed, but we heard that the Carib Reserve had been less badly hit. The bright expensive new homes built above St Aroment were stripped. In Pottersville and Fond Cole (below) the damage was terrible. But the heart of Roseau itself, looking so broken and threadbare, with piles of junk in the streets and sad hungry people strolling, wrung my own heart. Some of the people did not behave well. They had looted and stolen, invaded the airport to seize goods, held up a lorry with food boxes. A curfew was later imposed. No one on the streets of Roseau after 8 p.m. It is now nearly a month since we have bought bread.

Overnight, many people we had thought of as well-off had become poor. They joined the queues for rationed food and some slept in the Police Station. The STAR is ruined too. Our office has been commandeered by the landlord, quite understandably, for homeless relatives, and there isn't a square inch of space to let in Roseau. Soon we will have to drag our bits of machinery to the already overcrowded cottage, Mill House. This highly personal letter is written not only to explain our condition to anxious enquirers but also explain to our kind and dear relatives, friends, STAR readers and supporters the position we are in. It is now pouring with rain again, but we have a nearly effective roof with only three leaks.

Our first visitors were the sons of Thomas Irish, who walked down to find out if we were alive, bringing a packet of biscuits. Then an English-

man passed by in a jeep, leading a bulldozer with chainsaw. They sliced through the road's fallen coconut trees, but at a certain stage could not go on. The Englishman gave Robert seven eggs and later his kind wife, when the road was clear, brought us two most welcome food parcels from Cousin Rufus and the Langrishes. Now at last we had some roofing nails, some protein, sugar and rice. Joey Vanterpool brought us sugar and flour. Robert baked a little bread.

On my next difficult trip to town, on foot, I sought out Albert Bethel, a STAR schoolboy part timer, and made a compact with him to fix our roof temporarily for \$100. He came next day bringing his little brother, who shortly afterwards fell through the ceiling board into the kitchen, but was miraculously unhurt. Albert made a fine start nailing in the horrible galvanize. In one day,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the house was roof-patched. His own home had been completely destroyed, in 'Johnstown' (Bath Estate). Other visitors were Pat Martin, Gerard Magloire who later gave me a lift, and another Englishman (Cornish) married to the proprietor of La Belle Creole.

One of our boxes contained some V2 US army rations, and very nice tasty and gentlemanly they were. We found that if we added rice and dashine spinach (wonders: the dashine was coming up again!) we could make a meal for three or even four out of one little box. Every day we had to feed three, four or five, for Robbie (who had been sick with a bad cold, not having any warm clothes in the Reserve rains) arrived one day; then there was Albert, and sometimes Aylmer Irish. My job as cook took some ingenuity; Robert's big job was to straighten out with a 9 lb. hammer the devilishly twisted sheets of galvanize before handing them up roofwards.

Then, the miracles. Wonder of wonders! on the fourth day, two shy birds came back. They came by ones, without mates, but suddenly we heard birdsong. Even the humming birds came back tremulously. The kittens caught a young crapaud but didn't kill it — I picked it up by one cold leg and put it in safe grass. Then we noticed the green leaves on the Bohinia (orchid tree) showing; it was partly uprooted, lying on its side. Then marvellous! it began to show its orchid flowers timidly. Today it is alight with blossoms, and several part-fallen orange trees are not only in leaf but bearing orange blossom! The felled bananas are trying hard to make new shoots. The slopes of mountains are showing a little tender new green. But the trees, the huge trees for which we campaigned so ardently, are still dead looking, blasted. Yet the landscape is fascinating. We see to distances which we could never have seen before — buildings

on the Morne, Emshall, high peaks, the road to Trafalgar laid bare!

We have survived. As Robert remarked during our three loneliest of days, everybody has forgotten us — or else they think we are indestructible. We have more help — our Carib son is back. Yet we ask everybody to be patient with us because our burden is still very heavy and we don't know what the morrow will bring. Fetching water from our new stream, boiling it to drink, trying to do the interminable mud-detaching and cleaning jobs ... all these are only part of the work.

The good thing: the true affection shown by Dominican relatives abroad for those who suffered under hurricane David; and the tremendous compassion shown by individuals and even nations towards our stricken land.

The bad thing: attempts to gain a quick profit out of the hurricane. We know that much public money will come in. But we hope and trust, and will try to watch, that it is not misspent.

A. L. McLEOD

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## Claude McKay's Adaptation to Audience

From 1890 to 1920 the United States experienced the transposition of a vast population of Negroes from a southern feudal peasantry to a northern urban proletariat, which resulted in the delineation of racial ghettos, or black belts, the most famous of which is New York's Harlem. This new racial experience called for a literary movement to express and interpret it, and the result was what is generally called the Harlem Renaissance, a post-war phenomenon projected on the plane of an increasingly articulate élite. It was concurrent with mass unemployment, the jazz age, race riots, the European expatriation of the Lost Generation, and

was characterized by 'an angry, sceptical, restless mood' that could be discerned even in the cities of Canada.<sup>1</sup>

James Weldon Johnson, accurately described as 'the only true artist among the early Negro novelists'<sup>2</sup> and a literary critic of uncommon perspicacity, declared the Jamaica-born Claude McKay to be 'one of the great forces in bringing about . . . the Negro literary Renaissance',<sup>3</sup> and McKay himself acknowledged that he was more a forerunner than a principal in the movement. But he has consistently been identified with it because some of his early American poems expressed in language of consummate lyricism and exigent craftsmanship the deepest feelings of the black masses still waiting for their literary spokesmen. Yet he stood apart, a black writer adapting to white audiences.

McKay's initial literary acclaim resulted from the publication in 1912 of *Songs of Jamaica and Canastot Ballads*, an aggregate of 78 poems – largely of place, taste, tradition, and Empire – written in dialect that purports to capture the phonological and linguistic idiosyncrasies of West Indian pidgin, and characterized by McKay's mentor-editor as 'What Italian is to Latin . . . a feminine version of masculine English'.<sup>4</sup>

Walter Jekyll, an English dilettante living in Jamaica, had heard about 'a negro who was writing poetry' and arranged to see his work. As McKay recalls:

He read my poetry one day. Then he laughed a lot. . . All these poems that I gave him to read had been done in straight English, but there was one short one in the Jamaican dialect. That was the poem that he was laughing about. He then told me that he did not like my poems in straight English – they were repetitious. 'But this', he said, 'is the real thing. Now is your chance as a native boy to put the Jamaican dialect into literary language. I am sure that your poems will sell'.<sup>5</sup>

McKay discovered that dialect poems were much easier to write than poems in straight English: 'Poems seemed to flow from my heart, my head, my hands. I just could not restrain myself from writing. When I sent them to Mr Jekyll, he wrote back to say that each new one was more beautiful than the last'.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the young author redirected his instinctive predilection for the

use of standard literary English (with which he had become proficient through reading books lent to him by his brother, a school-teacher) to the language of colonial tutelage. It was one thing for Jekyll to collect Annancy tales and transcribe them into his approximation of the West Indian dialect, but it was almost nefarious to encourage a native youth aspiring to poetic expression to resort to dialect English: first, because there was no legitimate literary market among indigenes; second, because the European population would replicate Jekyll's response and laugh at his poems; finally, because – as Frantz Fanon tells us – 'The Negro of the West Indies becomes proportionately whiter – that is, he becomes closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the language'.<sup>7</sup> And only with that mastery does he ultimately gain his particular or universal audience.

The American vogue of dialect poetry had begun during the Civil War with the effusions of Irwin Russell, a white Southerner, which were lauded by Joel Chandler Harris for their depiction of the old-fashioned, unadulterated Negro, still dear to the Southern heart. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the first Black writer to use the form, sought to amuse white readers to whom the stereotype of Negroes as childlike poltroons was agreeable, and was commended by William Dean Howells, the doyen of author-critics and arbiter of philistine values in his day. But dialect verse, based on the minstrel tradition, actually presented caricatures and sentimentalized situations that bore little, if any, relation to the actual world of the American Negro. It is therefore remarkable that Claude McKay, working in a form so clearly circumscribed in content, theme, and style, produced individual poems of some artistic merit.

*Songs of Jamaica* was an immediate, if not a sustained, success: it was reviewed in several British colonies, and the edition of 2,000 copies was apparently justified, though there was insufficient demand for a reprint until 1972. McKay tells us that

The wealthy near-whites and the American and British residents all wanted to know me. Mr Jekyll trotted me out. Wherever I went, I read my poems in the dialect and they all caused great amusement among the upper-class people.<sup>8</sup>

Further, he indicates that Jekyll tried to get an acquaintance to place a copy on King Edward's table, because 'even though the book was not read, if it were mentioned in a London drawing room of consequence, and reviewed by society, it might have a sale as a curiosity'. Encouraged by events to try gilding the lily, Jekyll even toyed with the belief that 'Shakespeare might become interesting in the American Negro dialect'.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear, then, that the neophyte poet's audience had been determined for him by his mentor's insistence on the use of Jamaican dialect, so that the users of standard English would be amused by the efforts of a colonial native. While the technique of the poems is imitative of minor Victorian verse in their stanzaic and rhythmic patterns, the language is clearly presumed to be wholly unfamiliar to the audience, for the first 50 poems are glossed with 480 footnotes; only four poems lack notes. Even the title of the opening poem, 'Quashie to Buccra', is explained as meaning Black man speaking to White man. It is clearly redundant of Jekyll to comment in the Preface that 'Readers of this volume will be interested to know that they have here the thoughts and feelings of a Jamaican peasant of pure black blood'.

But what are those thoughts and feelings? In 'My Native Land, My Home', the poet reassures his audience that while

Jamaica is de nigger's place,  
No mind whic' some declare . . .

E'en ef you mek me beggar die,  
I'll trust you all de same,  
An none de less on you rely,  
Nor saddle you wid blame.

And in 'Old England' he sings a canticle to King and Empire that must have warmed many a planter's or civil servant's heart. The poet opens by telling us that he has an unconquerable longing in his heart

Just to view de homeland England, in de streets of London walk  
An' to see de famous sights dem 'bouten which dere's so much talk

An' to see de fact'ry chimneys pourin' smoke up to de sky,  
An' to see de matches-children dat I hear 'bout, passing by.

He then says that he would love to see Saint Paul's cathedral and hear 'some of de great Learnin' coming from de bishops', and to visit Westminster Abbey in order to

see immortal Milton an' de wul'-famous Shakespeare,  
Past'ral Wordsworth, Gentle Gray, an' all de great sons buried dere.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, he assures us that he would then return to the Caribbean.

Unfortunately, this type of verse is to be found in the literary first fruits of most of the Commonwealth countries; and in Nigeria one of the poets, Dennis Chukude Osadebay, produced doggerel much worse in his *Africa Sings* as recently as 1952.

Apparently the youthful McKay realized that he had been used for the amusement of a local parlor audience, because in his autobiographical manuscript 'My Green Hills of Jamaica' he recalls that 'Back in my mind there had really been the desire to find a bigger audience. Jamaica was too small for high achievement. There, one was isolated, cut off from the great currents of life. . . . Some day I would write poetry in straight English and amaze and confound them'.<sup>11</sup> And this resolve reminds us of Frantz Fanon's observation that 'Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world'.<sup>12</sup>

Although he was immediately and inaccurately called the 'Burns of Jamaica', McKay left to pursue studies in agriculture in the United States. Then, withdrawing from academic work for a series of menial and manual employments, he says, 'I poured myself out with passion of love and hate, of sorrow and joy, writing out of myself, waiting for an audience'.<sup>13</sup>

In his *Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History*, R. S. Crane declares:

A writer has always . . . a contemporary audience in view, the specific character of which is bound to influence to some extent, often without full awareness on his part, the invention and handling of his matter . . . Every



work, no matter how perfect its art, inevitably reflects its audience ... through the moral, social, psychological and literary conventions it employs. Less distinguished works of any age tend to be mere formulary productions in which everything is determined in their writers' preoccupation with what the general public expected, or would resent, in writings of a certain kind.<sup>14</sup>

This is essentially a paraphrase of Aristotle's commentary in Book II of the *Rhetoric*, and is widely accepted, though some also see merit in Walter S. Ong's thesis that 'the writer's audience is always a fiction'.<sup>15</sup>

While waiting for his audience, McKay met Frank Harris, the editor of *Pearson's Magazine*, who was impressed with the young Jamaican's outpouring of 'love and hate, sorrow and joy', and published some of his poems. Subsequently, others appeared in Max Eastman's *The Liberator*, Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Worker's Dreadnought*, and I. A. Richards' *Cambridge Magazine* – all liberal bourgeois journals devoted to progressive causes and supported almost entirely by the white intelligentsia, socialist *reviewers*, and others of literary-political interests. Thus, almost inadvertently, and clearly 'without full awareness on his part', McKay's future audience was determined; and it influenced both invention and handling of his content. The Negro Question was only one of the interests of these periodicals – perhaps even a peripheral one – and such poems as 'The Harlem Dancer', 'Joy in the Woods', and 'Summer Morn in New Hampshire' (mainly orthodox sonnets of place and mood which give incontrovertible proof of McKay's exigent craftsmanship) were surely more agreeable than the strident truculence of such poems of social protest as 'If We Must Die', 'The Lynching' and 'To the White Fiends'.

Eastman, paraphrasing Shelley, told McKay, 'You are the leading revolutionary figure in the Negro world',<sup>16</sup> and the poet was apparently convinced; but oblivious to the restraints imposed by the selection or acceptance of any contemporary audience, he then demanded that *The Liberator* devote additional space to the Negro Question. The more realistic Eastman countered that 'If we publish too much material about the Negro, our white readers would dismiss the magazine, not the material. They would stop

buying and reading it'.<sup>17</sup> The result was an editorial contretemps and McKay's departure for the Third International, meeting in Moscow, in search of a different audience.

Contrary to Eastman's estimate and McKay's own fancy, he did not enjoy a leadership role in the black community: in fact, he was not even accepted as a member of its literary elite. Jean Wagner explains it this way:

Many of the Black Renaissance intellectuals never considered Claude McKay as one of their group. They were a bit afraid of this intruder from Jamaica who just popped up in Harlem one fine morning . . . and preferred the company of Leftist extremists to the elegant ambience of the salons. On the other hand, while the Renaissance was in full swing in America, McKay was wandering through Europe and North Africa, and so he cut himself off from the center of the black world that Harlem had meanwhile become. Further, his whole character, intransigent and violent, and the passion with which he lashed out at his friends of both races often gave him a reputation for being unsociable and rebellious.<sup>18</sup>

Further, McKay was obsessed with the Negro Question in the abstract: not a noted realist, he was concerned about long-range and universal problems, while the Harlem writers were more immediate and parochial but practical in their outlook. When he was in the Soviet Union he affected to be an African, a symbol of the universal black man rather than a Jamaican or an American Negro, and he had no compunction in usurping the role of the mulatto who was an official member of the American delegation. And he was never really an American Black; he remained at heart a West Indian. (It must be remembered that McKay retained his British citizenship until 1940.) Most important, it seems, he never identified with the urban Black of the United States: his orientation was always to an Edenic countryside of myth and memory: 'My island of Jamaica', he writes in his literary testament (completed just before his death and still unpublished), 'was like a beautiful garden of human relationships . . . We all grew up like wildflowers, like an exotic garden planted by God'. And it was this vivid recollection, this fond remembrance of a distant time and place that provided him with the basis for his repeated an-

tithe of *la vie naturelle* and *la vie mécanique*, to the clear advantage of the first.

This attachment to his island paradise was an obvious impediment to establishing rapport with southern share-croppers who had been translated to the brownstone tenements of Harlem; and they were unlikely to become his audience when he wrote, 'I love to think of Communism liberating millions of city folk to go back to the land'.<sup>19</sup>

But the real explanation of his failure to gain an identifiable Black audience may rest in his candid acknowledgement in 'My Green Hills' that in Jamaica 'Our opinion of American Negroes was that they were all clowns, more or less'.

With such a premise, the only tenable conclusion is that McKay quite early, and as a result of a cultural imperative, decided that his literary audience must be white; his youthful and continuing association with freethinkers of socialist leanings further narrowed it, and the break with *The Liberator* further impelled him towards communism. As the only fcted black in Moscow he found yet another – and more demanding – audience to adapt to.

The immediate literary consequence of McKay's 'magic pilgrimage' (as he called the Russian visit) was a speech to the Fourth Congress; in addition, there was a short correspondence with Trotsky, and a booklet containing three short stories: 'The Mulatto Girl', 'Soldier's Return', and the eponymous 'Trial by Lynching', which emphasize the horrors of Southern life for Negroes, the poignancies of inter-racial associations, and the close relationship between capitalist enterprise and racial policy. In a prefatory note to 'Trial by Lynching', the Russian translator describes McKay as 'a member of the American Workers' Party, which adheres to the Comintern and develops communist propaganda among negroes'. Understandably, such a disclosure would not endear him to United States immigration officials, but the only copy in the United States was not available in English until 1976.<sup>20</sup>

Early in 1923 McKay completed *The Negroes in America*, which he had been commissioned to write for the State Publishing Department of the U.S.S.R., and which has only now been trans-

lated. This clearly shows the extent to which McKay had distanced himself from the mainstream of the American black community: he openly criticizes Booker T. Washington and his moderates, Dr W. E. B. DuBois and his 'Talented Tenth' policy, A. Philip Randolph and the black trade unionists, and virtually all others. Finally, in two appendices he establishes himself as a *bona fide* member of the Communist Party, and by so doing, gained a moment's attention in a foreign land and cut his ties with Harlem.

Leaving the Soviet Union, McKay became 'a troubador wanderer' (to use his own phrase), and settled mainly in Marseilles and Morocco, where he produced four works of fiction. *Home to Harlem* (1928), a structurally weak novel of life in the Black Belt, was criticized by Dr DuBois as a filthy and degenerate work that catered to the prurient interests of Whites; *Banjo* (1929), set in Marseilles, was again salacious and pandered to those curious about the licentiousness of directionless Blacks; *Gingertown* (1932), a collection of short stories, offered vignettes of the feckless in both Harlem and Jamaica. But it was apparent that McKay was now as far from the essence of one place as the other: his writing lacked both veracity and verisimilitude. Gladys Wilson, a friend, wrote to him, 'But Claude, when you write of Harlem . . . somehow it doesn't click. Of course, you have been away for ten years and many changes have taken place'.<sup>21</sup> Stylistically, his writing was becoming anachronistic, structurally it was becoming episodic, and substantially it was becoming anathema. Finally, in *Banana Bottom* (1933) he wrote a novel about missionaries and a native victim of rape, set in a Rousseauesque version of Jamaica where the Blacks - McKay's 'no-land race' - enjoy 'laughter and melody . . . simple, sensuous feelings and responses', and 'the compensating security of big-bosomed women'.

All of these works are examples of Crane's 'mere formulary productions in which nearly everything is determined by their writers' preoccupations with what the general public expected', and are therefore properly described as undistinguished. Alain Locke, a Harlem Black, accused McKay of having become a 'black twin' of Frank Harris, and of being 'caught in the egocentric predicament of aesthetic vanity and exhibitionism' and hence

guilty of apostasy to Jamaica, Harlem, and the Left.<sup>22</sup>

After his return to the United States in 1934, McKay wrote two prose works; the first was *A Long Way From Home* (1937), an apologia enlivened by anecdotal reminiscences of people and places, comments on 'reactionary criticism', and romanticized reflections on life in Marseilles 'Among a great gang of black and brown humanity . . . all herded together in a warm group . . . The odors of dark bodies, sweating through a day's hard work, like the odor of stabled horses'.<sup>23</sup> It was against just such conditions that Harlem had rioted. His *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940) is a quasi-sociological mélange of commentary clearly intended for the delectation of white voyeurs. Father Divine, Marcus Garvey, black entertainers and politicians are subjected to an iconoclastic, sometimes satiric, scrutiny, while the final fifty pages (ostensibly on organized labour among Negroes) degenerates into an anti-communist screed. The one-time partisan attacks 'the intellectuals and intelligentsia . . . who were fooled and stampeded by Communist tactics', expresses a preference for Fascism *vis-à-vis* Communism, now again supports Booker T. Washington, and advocates segregation and the separate development of Blacks – i.e., *apartheid*.

His apotheosis and absolute alienation from the literary fellowship of Baptist Harlem came with his conversion to Roman Catholicism, his writing for the *Catholic Worker*, and his declaration in 'My Green Hills' that 'the Protestant Church . . . from the beginning of its existence was the concubine of imperialist aggressors . . . Catholicism has remained a sister of mercy'. Understandably, he moved to Chicago and thus removed himself physically as far away from the black masses that he had wanted as an audience as he had already done emotionally and intellectually.

In essence, McKay's failure to become the literary voice of America's vast black community was the result of his constant adaptation to white audiences, and his inability to see himself as an urban Negro, which was a consequence of his Jamaican background. As Fanon tells us, the West Indian schoolboy

subjectively adopts a white man's attitude. Little by little one can observe in the young West Indian the formation and crystallization of an attitude and a way of thinking that are essentially white . . . But the West Indian does not think of himself as a black man; he thinks of himself as a West Indian. The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively, intellectually, the West Indian conducts himself like a white man. But he is black.<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

1. Desmond Pacey, 'The Writer and His Public, 1920-1960', in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Carl F. Klinck et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 477.
2. Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 46.
3. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930), p. 266.
4. *The Distasteful Poetry of Claude McKay* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), p. 5.
5. Claude McKay, 'My Green Hills of Jamaica' (unpublished MS), p. 99.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
7. Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masque Blanc* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962), p. 34. (My translation.)
8. McKay, 'My Green Hills of Jamaica', p. 50.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
10. Milton is buried in St Giles, Cripplegate; Wordsworth at Grasmere; Shakespeare at Stratford-on-Avon; Gray at Stoke Poges. To err is human.
11. McKay, 'My Green Hills of Jamaica', p. 117.
12. Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
13. Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 4.
14. R. S. Crane, *Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 68-69.
15. Walter S. Ong, 'The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction' *PMLA*, 90, 1 (1975), 9-21.
16. Letter from Max Eastman to Claude McKay, 12 April 1923, in *The Poetics of Claude McKay*, edited by Wayne Cooper (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 89.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
18. Jean Wagner, *Les Poètes Nègres des États-Unis* (Paris: Librairie Istra, 1963), p. 211. (My translation.)
19. 'How Black Sees Green and Red', *The Liberator*, IV (June 1921), 20.
20. Claude McKay, *Trial by Lynching: Stories about Negro Life in North America*, edited by A. L. McLeod (Mysore, 1976).

21. Letter, 23 March 1923. James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University Library.
22. Alain Locke, 'Spiritual Truancy', *New Challenge*, 2 (1937), 81-84.
23. McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, p. 277.
24. Fanon, p. 140. (The writer's translation.)

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The CRNLE still has some copies of *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium* for sale. These are papers collected from a conference on Australia's Nobel Prize-winning writer and deal with a wide range of his output and techniques. They are published in paperback for the price of \$A6.00 including surface postage.

# The Year That Was

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## AUSTRALIA

It's been a year for the bizarre in Australian fiction: a transvestite who is a Byzantine empress/ station hand/ whore-mistress; a narrating foetus; a plantation owner who takes you out at night to wrestle renegade pine-apples to the ground; characters with words stamped on their foreheads and one with a coffin growing out of his side...

Little did Synge know when he said there should be material for drama with all those 'shepherds going mad in lonely huts'!

The theme of the year's most remarkable book, Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* (Jonathan Cape) is caught early when one of its characters remarks, 'The difference between the sexes is no worse than their appalling similarity'. It's a novel which seems to have been, unusually for White, more favourably received at home than abroad. Perhaps its complexity has surprised readers used to the simpler style of the three books preceding, and yet it is a more personal book: profoundly moving, witty and brittly entertaining in a way quite unlike anything else White has written. The story of Lt. Eddie Twyborn DSO, and his other lives in Europe is at least partly *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* fifty years on, with its title giving more than a nod to *The Tichborne Case* — and it has therefore a good deal to say about being Australian.

*The Twyborn Affair's* conscious yoking of colonial and sexual imagery compares interestingly with Thomas Keneally's *Passenger* (Collins), which centres on a foetus in transit between the placental richness of an Irish family background and the potential shock of a birth in Australia. And the foetus is the narrator, flowering into total knowledge at the touch of a laser probe. Birth, with which the novel closes, is the end of everything rather than a beginning.

*Passenger* is Keneally's best novel since *Gossip From the Forest*. It is delightfully witty, satirical, a colonial disorientation myth, a religious novel (not surprisingly), and a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Foetus, in which Keneally, in an interesting but problematical stylistic dichotomy,



takes on the constant tussle between high and popular styles in his work and in Australian literature generally.

The Shandyan device of pre-natal narration which initially seems to link *Passenger* with David Ireland's *A Woman of the Future* (Allen Lane/ Penguin), is one of those intriguing spirit-of-time coincidences like that of the Keneally/ Astley/ Ireland novels about aborigines in the early '70s, but with less obvious roots.

In centring on a female narrator and main character, *A Woman of the Future* is straight away a disarming departure for this novelist who has caught Australian male mythology so brilliantly in such novels as *The Glass Canoe* and *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*. And while it doesn't quite pack the immediate punch of those novels, *A Woman of the Future* is at once more thoughtful and more carefully constructed.

Here, David Ireland uses the laser-like observation of the young girl Alethea Hunt to accumulate a bizarre and alarming picture of the future Great Australian Ugliness. And yet balancing Alethea's own bleak vision is the acceptance and compassion she gradually learns from her father and others. *A Woman of the Future* is finally a more optimistic novel than anything else Ireland has written: it is about watering the desert metaphorically, even literally, and as its American publication and reviews suggest, will be the novel to give David Ireland the wider audience he deserves.

Another writer too long denied the serious attention her work demands is Thea Astley, three times winner of the Miles Franklin Award, and still the only major female novelist in Australia since Christina Stead. In *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (Nelson), she finds the right balance between the rich and spare styles of her novels *The Acolyte* and *A Kindness Cup*, and returns to the absurd comedy which is her greatest strength.

Set in Australia's Deep North around Cairns, this is a linked sequence of stories about the screwballs who live there, somewhat bent but still laughing and crying, under the rule of 'the Gang of One': dole-cheque hippies hanging onto the late '60s in the rainforest; bomb squads sent out to defuse a case of mangoes... They're all crazy! And despite Australia's apparent difficulty in accepting a satirist who is female, they are captured with not only wit, but unmistakable compassion. *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* joins a gathering number of books about amazing scenes to our north.

The acrobatic revisions that thesis-writers will begin to make to their assessments of Randolph Stow as a child-star-burnt-out-at-32 novelist

may be as interesting as Stow's new novel *Visitants* (Secker and Warburg) itself.

Curiously, within a year, both Stow and Christopher Koch have broken their long silence with a vengeance: Koch, with his best novel so far, *The Year of Living Dangerously*; and Stow with his most difficult, *Visitants*. Set in Papua in 1959, *Visitants* takes as its central image the well-known report at the time, of a UFO sighting by an Anglican missionary and thirty seven Papuan witnesses. As the novel develops, 'the isle is full of noises' indeed, strange and half-heard: murder, arson, cargo-cult, disappearances, visitants (some of them Australian). The multiple point of view employed to give shape to the chaos often obscures rather than clarifies, making *Visitants* on the one hand Stow's richest novel; on the other, his most difficult and disturbing — and a must for re-reading either way.

The outstanding first novel of the year is *1915* (UQP) by Roger McDonald, who is already highly praised and to some extent (like this novel) over-praised as one of the best of the newer poets in the last ten years. *1915* was marketed (the only word) with a good deal of advertising 'hype' that misrepresented its main strength. Yes it is about Gallipoli and young Australians going off to war, but it is more about the 'going off' than about the war itself. And that's as McDonald intends it to be: war in close focus, through the eyes of two country boys and the people they leave behind. It's a poet's novel, beautifully written; perhaps slower and longer than it should be, but a remarkable achievement and one that promises much from his next novel nevertheless.

In short fiction, Morris Lurie's *Running Nicely* (Nelson), and the keenly awaited second volume from *The Fat Man in History's* Peter Carey, *War Crimes* (UQP), are worth mentioning. But *The Hottest Night of the Century* (A & R) turned up, under its quite literal and playfully misleading title, the best new short stories, from expatriate Glenda Adams. Right from the first sentence the reader is hooked: 'Sometimes I tell lies, and sometimes I only tell stories, but never with intent to harm. I only want to please people and make them happy.' Some of the stories here reflect Adams' Australian experience, and some of them the point of view of her home in New York for the past sixteen years. Readers interested in new writing by Australian women may find the short story anthology *Stories of Her Life* edited by Sandra Zurbo (Outback Press) useful — more useful in fact than its companion volume of poetry a few years back, *Mother, I'm Rooted* — but they can do no better in 1979 than the work of this one woman in *The Hottest Night of the Century*.

In poetry, the year is David Campbell's, whose untimely and painful death was strangely overshadowed by the triumphant vitality of *The Man in the Honeysuckle* (A & R). This is an exciting book. The signs are there for those determined on a search, but it is far from being consciously a Last Book.

Unfavourable judgements are ventured from time to time on the recent writing of Wright, Hope, Stewart — the generation responsible for much of the character of Australian poetry as it's generally known. David Campbell may have begun more modestly than his contemporaries, but the poetry of *The Man in the Honeysuckle* is a uniquely powerful finish.

Its excellence tends to overwhelm *The Border Loss* (A & R), a new collection by Jennifer Maiden, who is a striking and individual voice at her best; as it overwhelms an expensive collector's piece in A. D. Hope's *The Drifting Continent and Other Poems* (Brindabella Press), illustrated by Arthur Boyd — which as a book of poems about Australia appears a curiosity more than anything, from this particular poet... (Though his *The New Cratylus: Notes on the Craft of Poetry* from O.U.P. is Hope at his best, talking frankly and easily about the writing of poetry in a way that persuades me again that his critical writings may live longer than the poems for which he is more widely known.)

Aside from Campbell's, the year's best collection is Robert Gray's third, *Grass Script* (A & R). Gray is in the Wright and Murray mainstream of Australian poetry, but with a Buddhist philosophy underlying the poems that is his own mark (and that perhaps invites comparison with Stow's earlier application of a Taoist point of view to nature in Australia). *Grass Script* is an excellent successor to Gray's previous volume, *Creekwater Journal* — losing perhaps some of the fresh innocence of that book, but confirming the impression that Gray's ability to capture the zen moment in just the right image again and again is remarkable.

New volumes by Robert Adamson, *Where I Come From*, and Dorothy Hewett, *Greenhouse* (both Big Smoke) point to new directions: for Hewett towards tighter discipline; for Adamson, back to simplicity and the *faux naïf*, in these recollections and fantasies about childhood on the Hawkesbury mudflats. And Hewett produces in *The Man from Muckinupës* (Currency) the best playscript published this year, and her best play since *The Chapel Perilous*.

Two significant publications relevant to Australian children's literature: ignore the cute title and go straight into *Seven Little Billabongs* (Melbourne U.P.). Brenda Niall's important study of Mary Grant Bruce

and Ethel Turner, two of the best early writers, revived for reasons both literary and sociological in recent years; and Rosemary Wighton's edition of the first Australian book for children, *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* (Jacaranda), a standard point of reference, but till now available only in its original 1841 condition in the state libraries.

And finally, an anthology indispensable to those interested in the development of a national consciousness in Australian literature, Brian Elliott's very good anthology, *The Jindyworobaks* (UQP). Rightly, in view of Les Murray's and Patricia Wighuson's sustained experiments with the Jindyworobak ideal of fusing white and black Australian mythologies in literature, the book concludes by admitting that its original thesis of the Jindyworobak poem or story as a 'closed form' may have to be revised. The Jindyworobak movement became for some time regarded as an eccentric and immature joke, due to influential criticisms such as A. D. Hope's, which referred to it as the 'Boy Scout School of Australian Poetry'.

But the Jindyworobaks may yet have the last laugh as Hope's own poetry seems to settle into a place of historical rather than living importance, and interest in the Jindyworobaks is renewed. And as those lonely huts, whether peopled by mad shepherds or Boy Scout poets, appear less Upside-Down every year...

MARK MACLEOD

Mark Macleod teaches Australian and children's literature at Macquarie University, Sydney. He is currently writing a book on Bruce Dawe.

## NEW ZEALAND

Plumb in the centre of the target, so to speak, of New Zealand literary activity through 1979 is, surely, Maurice Gee's novel *Plumb* (Faber '78, now in paperback also) which won in 1979 three major literary awards — the James Tait Black in U.K., and the N.Z. Book Award (fiction) and Sir James Wattie Award both in N.Z. This uncompromising report on the life and times of a non-conforming Presbyterian minister has been discussed elsewhere; it seems it may be first of a trilogy. In some absolute

scale of literary merit may next come Allen Curnow's latest volume *An Incorrigible Music*; here the two main poems come from his recent Italian travel, 'In the Duomo', dealing with the Pazzi conspiracy in Renaissance Florence, and 'Moro Assassinato', set in contemporary Rome. The theme of death (and sacrifice?) runs through a masterly but dour book, with a recurrent and sardonic angling refrain, 'A big one!'. The title seems oddly counterpointed to his earlier *An Abominable Temper* (1973). In England expatriate Fleur Adcock released through Oxford *The Inner Harbour*, with a substantial New Zealand content relating, perhaps, to her recent visit there, also (from Bloodaxe Press), *Below Loughrigg*. Frank Sargeson, publishing in *Tandem* (Reed) with Edith Campion (a cycling partner whose earlier slightly gothic stories *A Place to Pass Through*, 1977, he highly praised) produced his 12th short novel.

Two important events in 'academic' publishing would appear to be (from Heinemann E.B.) a selection, *James K. Baxter as Critic*, ed. F. McKay and (from Oxford) *The Urewera Notebook Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Ian A. Gordon. The former of these is, of course, of interest rather to students of Baxter's poetry than to rigorous critics; the latter is Katherine Mansfield's final and lively journal (1907) of her New Zealand experience, specifically a camping holiday through this rugged Maori heartland. Antony Alpers, by the way, has a large and new study of Katherine Mansfield appearing shortly. In this context should be mentioned publication in *The Turnbull Library Record* XII (1) May 1979 (Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington) the hitherto unpublished manuscript of a synopsis, list of characters, and chapters one and two of Katherine Mansfield's early (and really terrible!) attempt at her novel *Maata*. This same issue of the *Record*, incidentally, contains a fascinating talk by James Bertram, 'Charles Brasch in Perspective', drawing on unpublished material in his forthcoming edition of Brasch's memoirs, *Indirections*. This title will almost certainly be released by the time these words appear in print, so perhaps this is also the place to note that by the same date (or even as I unwillingly scribble in December), from Oxford (N.Z.) should appear not only *Indirections*, but, extremely importantly, *Beginnings*, ed. Robin Dudding, in which an erstwhile editor of *Landfall* and founding editor of *Islands* gathers together a series of autobiographical sketches of that title that have appeared in these two journals, including such figures as Sargeson, Frame, Finlayson, Duggan, and major painter Colin McCahon. Oxford also promise (or threaten!) to inundate us with *The Collected Poems of James K. Baxter*, ed. J. E.

Weir, besides Vincent O'Sullivan's 6th volume of verse, *Brother Jonathan*, *Brother Kafka* and the return by poet of '50s now historian editing the projected Oxford History of New Zealand, W. H. Oliver, in his poems *Out of Season*. I do not get any commission (or even review copies!) from Oxford so I need declare no 'interest' in very strongly recommending not a literary but a historical title of theirs in 1978, *Looking Back*, ed. Keith Sinclair and Wendy Harrex. It is a quite invaluable photographic history of this country both in pictorial record and substantial text. 1979 saw no new titles added to Oxford's series 'New Zealand Writers and their Work'.

Perhaps the other most substantial publishing event of 1979 has been the recent appearance (November) of W. Samoan Albert Wendt's third novel *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (Longman Paul). It is a three-part novel of which the central part is the only slightly embellished and brilliant novella, 'Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree', already published. Wendt's title is undoubtedly *the* novel of the new South Pacific writing to date and will also hold a major and permanent place in all the literature of this area. This was a busy month for Wendt, for at the same time a young and innovative director, Paul Maunder, launched a commercial feature film of Wendt's *Sons for the Return Home*. This film had excellent, if searching, reviews; even more praise has been given to the film of Janet Frame's *A State of Siege*. This latter film won a Golden Hugo award in 1978 at Chicago, beating 140 other student films from round the world; it has now been sold widely to overseas television (including, at the time of writing, Denmark and Belgium).

Film-making has become an important area of creativity out here in the last few years and has been strongly linked with our literature throughout. In particular the series 'Winners and Losers', for TV, adapted several short stories a few years ago, and also Ian Cross's novel, *The God Boy*, made a TV film that was particularly praised. There was also *Sleeping Dogs*, based on C. K. Stead's *Smith's Dream*, released through commercial cinema. In 1979 besides the films of Wendt and Frame above, Roger Hall's social comedy *Middle Age Spread* has made a successful film; the play itself, surprisingly, has been playing successfully in England. Hall himself came to New Zealand as a nineteen year old immigrant; his latest play, *Prisoners of Mother England*, (putative origin of 'Pommy') has played to capacity audiences in Wellington and appears to draw upon this same field of immigrant experience in New Zealand as some of the poetry by Peter Bland, some years ago, and, currently, Russell Haley. Hall's plays are published here by Price Milburn.

Frank Moorhouse and David Williamson. Such transcendence of traditional *pakeha* (European New Zealand) insularity was furthered by a panel of readers including Albert Wendt, Patricia Grace, Hone Tuwhare, newcomer Apirana Taylor and others. Moorhouse's session was a comic *tour de force* presenting 'The drover's wife' (Lawson), 'The drover's wife' (Drysdale's painting), 'The drover's wife' (Murray Bail) and 'The drover's wife' ('paper' by an Italian student of Commonwealth literature at Milan). Wendt stressed N.Z. was part of the South Pacific — but was he really heard?

Some excellent papers included C. K. Stead's 'From Wystan to Carlos: modern and modernist in New Zealand poetry' and Lawrence Jones's 'Inside and outside: realist and non-realist fiction'. Stead's paper is in latest *Islands* (No 27); hopefully Jones's may surface sooner in *Landfall*?

PETER ALCOCK



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## SINGAPORE

1979 was an exciting year. Though not much was actually published, plenty was done by way of promotion and encouragement. The Ministry of Culture came out in support of local writing, with promises of subsidy for publication as well as the aim of setting up a journal to foster creative writing in all the four language streams, i.e. English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. This official support is most welcome and long overdue.

The most significant publication of 1979 is, no doubt, Edwin Thumboo's *Ulysses by the Merlion*. The love poems in it remind one of his very early verse, though economy and precision tightly observed are new dimensions: 'So delicate/ This silence we fall upon/ It feeds mutual thought'. The title poem will surely go down as being among Singapore's classics. In its ability to render forth the social history of this tiny island, in its vibrancy of expression, 'Ulysses by the Merlion' reveals Thumboo at his national best:

Despite unequal ways,  
Together they mutate,  
Explore the edges of harmony,  
Search for a centre;  
Have changed their gods,  
Kept some memory of their race  
In prayer, laughter, the way  
Their women dress and greet  
They hold the bright, the beautiful,  
Good ancestral dreams  
Within new visions,  
So shining, urgent,  
Full of what is new.

The collection enhances Thumboo's stature as being the most important poet writing in English to emerge from Singapore.

Tan Kok Seng, who had made his mark by writing *Son of Singapore* (1972), came out with *Three Sisters of Se* (Heinemann). It has an interesting story line, centring around the conflict which arises when siblings have been educated from different standpoints. The fact that the mother of the girls (the sisters) gambles overmuch and leaves the daughters to their own devices further heightens the dramatic tensions of the novel. Tan attempts (and to some extent succeeds) to portray a very serious social problem besetting Singapore and Malaysia. We could do with more such explorations.

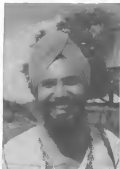


*Fourteen Short Stories* (Pan Pacific) by Lim Thean Soo unfortunately failed to capture the popular interest. Lim writes with great feeling for his characters (and perhaps sometimes overdoes this a little) but his sense for community, his sharp observations are to be commended. Lim is preparing a sequel to the book.

*Pacific Quarterly*, January 1979 (guest-edited by K. Singh) was a special issue devoted to Singaporean and Malaysian Literature. Contains poems, short stories and essays. Singapore's *Sunday Times* (circulation over 100,000) started a weekly Poetry Corner (edited by K. Singh) and a weekly Profile on local writers by Lena Bandara. This was a most encouraging move.

Yasmine Gooneratne's *Poems from India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore* (1979, Heinemann) contains verse by Lee Tzu Pheng and Edwin Thumboo. K. Singh published a Checklist of Critical Writings on Singaporean and Malaysian Writing in English 1956-1976 in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* Vol. XIV, No. 1, August 1979.

#### KIRPAL SINGH



Kirpal Singh recently returned to the University of Singapore after completing his doctorate at the University of Adelaide. He is the South East Asian editor of *Pacific Quarterly* *Moana*, his first volume of poems, *Twenty Forms* was published in 1978 and together with R. Shepherd he has edited Patrick White *A Critical Symposium*.

A strange year. Manohar Malgonkar's novel *Open Season* was published by Orient (Bombay); K. R. S. Iyengar published a volume of poems, *Leaves From A Log*; Shiv K. Kumar too ambled into another field, this time the novel, with *The Bone's Prayer* (both Arnold-Heinemann, New Delhi).

Prabhakar Machwe's *Literary Studies and Sketches* came from United Writers, Calcutta. Pritish Nandy edited *The Vikas Book of Modern Indian Verse*, with contributions translated into, as well as originally written in, English. There were no other 'big' names.

One sign of having begun to 'make it' in India's literary world is to be published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta. Sushil Kumar Gupta, *Most Beloved*, Prabhu S. Gupta, *Continuations*, Sunita Jain, *Man of My Desires*, Christopher W. Parker, *The Suburban Journals*, Banumathi Srinivasan, *C-Flat: Poems*, and Raj Verman, *A Talisman of Love*, all appeared with that imprint.

A step up is represented by being able to find another publisher! This was managed by Raji Narasimhan after several novels from WW: *Forever Free* appeared from Orient. Rakshat Puri's poems *In The Chronicles* found Parag Prakashan, and Keshav Malik's *Storm Warning* found Samkaleen (both Delhi). Manuel C. Rodrigues self-published from Bombay his *Selected Poems* with a foreword by Professor Armando Menezes — who recently retired from Karnatak University, Dharwar. H. Kulkarni's *From the Beach* and *The Flaming Sword*, both came from United Writers, Calcutta.

Basile Vitsaxis, the Greek Ambassador to India, added both to Greek poetry in English and to Western poetry published in India, with his *Lake Candle Drops* (Samkaleen). Another foreign contribution is Alastair Niven's *The Yoke of Pity* (Arnold-Heinemann), a full study of the work of Mulk Raj Anand.

Indian contributions to the study of foreign literatures include S. T. Kallapur's elaborate exploration of the parallels between oriental tales and those of John Steinbeck, and C. R. Yarasimaelimath's *Jesting Jeremiah: A Study of Noel Coward's Comic Vision* (both from Karnatak University, Dharwar). K. K. Dyson has an excellent and detailed study of the journals and memoirs of the British in India from 1765-1856, *A Various Universe* (OUP, Delhi), but a disappointing first collection of poems, *Sap-Wood* (Writers Workshop). Her second collection, *Hibiscus From the North* (Mid-Day Publishers, Oxford, UK) is much better.

There is a renewed interest in Anglo-Indian literature in Britain, as in India. Ranabir Ray Chaudhury edited selections from the periodicals *The Englishman* and *The Friend of India*, in *Glances of Old Calcutta: 1836-50* (Nachiketa, Bombay), while Benoy Ghose edited selections from the *Calcutta Monthly Journal*, *John Bull*, *India Gazette*, *Bengal Harkara*, *The Reformer*, and *Brahmo Public Opinion*, in *Selections From English Periodicals of Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Papyrus, Calcutta). R. Parthasarathy edited *A Hundred Years of 'The Hindu'*, the principal English-language daily of South India (Kasturi, Madras), while M. Manuel and K. Ayyappa Parinkar edited a collection of essays on the effect of English on Indian literature, *English and India* (Macmillan, Madras).

Other ancillary literature of interest included Sajal Basu (ed.) *Underground Literature During the Emergency* (Minerva, Calcutta), Krishnabai Nimbkar, *A Political Dissenter's Diary 1970-78* (International Book Service, Pune, Vol. 1; Vol. 2 to come) and A. A. David, *Diary of a War Widow* (Sunrise, Delhi). The most substantial of these is undoubtedly A. B. Shah (ed.) *Letters and Correspondence (1883-1917) of Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922)*, which fills a massive gap in basic information relating to this pioneer woman reformer and writer; the editor's own humanist bias, however, leads to some misunderstandings in his introductory remarks. The Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture have shown unusual initiative in sponsoring such a publication (Bombay). Shamsunder Manohar Adhav's biographical *Pandita Ramabai* appeared from the Christian Literature Society, Madras. A. K. Mukherjee's *Guide to Selected Reference Tools and Indological Source Materials* (World Press, Calcutta) has material which may be of interest to western scholars attempting to understand India. Travel literature includes S. Nihal Singh's impressions of China, *The Gang and Nine Hundred Million* (Oxford and India Book House, N. Delhi) and Raj Thapar's *The Inducible Traveller* (Vikas).

The most notable event, in fiction, was the defection of Narendarpal Singh, who has won prizes from the Sahitya Akademi (the Indian Academy of Letters) for his work in Panjabi. He has now started writing novels in English: *Flaming Hills*, *Trapped*, and *On the Crest of Time* (Vikendrit, Delhi); this development needs to be seen along with the translation of Indian writing in English into regional languages which has been going on for several years.

K. A. Abbas portrayed the extremist Maoist group, *The Naxalites* for the first time in Indo-Anglian literature (Lok, N. Delhi). Nirmal

Nibedon also made some sort of history by becoming the first Indo-Anglian to use the politically troubled north-eastern area of India for artistic purposes. *The Night of the Guerrillas* (Lancers Publishers, N. Delhi). S. S. Dhami joined such Canadian-Asian writers as Leno Leitao, S. Padmanab, Stephen Gill, but has his *Mulaka* published by Arnold-Heinemann, rather than Vesta Publishers of Cornwall, Ontario.

Satirical short stories appeared in George Meneses *Pardon, Your Middle is Showing* (Orient Longman). Startling juxtapositions of a somewhat different order are to be discovered in Lawric Pinto's *Father Austin in Dastbin*, a sequel to *Alleluia in Kadi Masjid* (I), Sanjivan, N. Delhi. M. V. Rama Sarma, on the other hand, is steeped in tradition, like most South Indians: *The Bliss of Life*, S. Chand & Co., N. Delhi. Jyoti Jafa's historical novel, *Nurjahan* (United Writers), Balwant Gargi's autobiographical *The Naked Triangle* (Vikas), E. P. Menon's *Silent Storms* (Symphony), Tribhuwan Kapur's *In Ecstatic Embrace* and Vikram Kapur's *The Traumatic Bite* (both Vision Books), and E. Harter's *Bosom of the Family* (Arnold-Heinemann) should be known.

Remarkably, apart from Adhav on Pandita Ramabai, there are all of five other biographical volumes. The least weighty is Metropolitan Aprem's sketches, *The Nestorian Fathers* (Mar Narsai Press, Trichur) which may help to illuminate the ideas and practices of this unnecessarily maligned indigenous group. A. Mascarenhas explores the Roman Catholic *Fr. Joseph Vaz of Sancoale* (1651-1711), self published, Vasco, Goa.

M. O. Mathai's *My Days with Nehru* (Vikas) has aroused considerable warmth; Rajmohan Gandhi wrote with passion and sparkle, as always, *The Rajaji Story* (Bharathan, Madras). S. Nagaiah's *Memoirs of a Principal* (Tirupati) may help foreign readers to appreciate the problems facing Indian education. Primila Lewis's *Reason Wounded*, on the other hand, may help appreciation of the problems facing rural reconstruction: the book resulted from an attempt to unionize farm-workers in a suburb of Delhi (July 1975-January 1977).

A strange year. But an interesting one.

PRAHBU S. GUPTARA

Prabhu S. Gupta teaches at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India and is at present completing his doctorate at Stirling University, Scotland. His first book of verse, *Continuations*, was published in 1979.

## WEST INDIES

All the notable prose fiction came from novelists who had previously made their mark. V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (London: Deutsch; New York: Knopf) is yet another of his dispassionate and disheartening reports on the post-colonial Third World, the focus this time being on Africa. It is a thoughtful act of de-mythologizing which at the same time leaves the impression that the myth of the Dark Continent is alive and well. In *The Dragon Can't Dance* (London: Deutsch), Earl Lovelace fulfils the promise of his first two novels, *While Gods Are Falling* and *The Schoolmaster*. Chronicling the hard lives of dwellers in a shanty-town yard in Port-of-Spain, Lovelace writes with sympathetic but unsentimental insight into the Trinidadian popular arts of carnival and calypso, and offers a sound analysis of the origins and nature of despair and rebelliousness in the deprived.

Roy A. K. Heath followed his prize-winning *The Murderer with From the Heat of the Day* (London: Allison & Busby), the story of an unsuccessful marriage across the class line in British Guyana in the 1920s. Allison & Busby also reprinted George Lamming's *Season of Adventure*, a most welcome event. Also very welcome was the publication, at last, of Claude McKay's memoir *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (Kingston & Port-of-Spain: Heinemann Caribbean) in a volume, edited by Mervyn Morris, which includes the Jamaican short stories from McKay's *Gangertown*.

Derek Walcott's latest collection of poems, *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), takes up again some of Walcott's major themes, including exile, the burden of history, the will to endure and the threats of political tyranny and disorder. The two most interesting pieces, representing in different ways new departures for Walcott, are the two long poems: 'The Schooner *Flight*' and the title poem. The latter, quite consciously appropriating something of the method and style of Gabriel Garcia Marquez' novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, looks at the dilemma of an idealistic, sincere West Indian Prime Minister dreaming of a revolution without bloodshed. Perhaps because the manner of the poem is somewhat atypical of Walcott, it seems to lack some of that positive textual and sub-textual complexity which is part of his strength. 'The Schooner *Flight*' has it, yet conveyed through the easy, blunt-speaking vernacular voice of the poem's 'red-nigger' sailor-protagonist.

His retrospective scrutiny of his life, deepened by the long perspective of West Indian history, is articulated in a happy, long-awaited blending of

Walcott's lyrical and dramatic voices, these in turn blended with the narrative/novelistic voice.

In *Shadow-Boxing* (London & Port-of-Spain: New Beacon), Mervyn Morris's art continues to perfect itself, an art of good sense working out of a strong, questioning concern about his relationship with self and society and through sparer and sparer ironic parables. Anthony McNeill's *Credences at the Altar of Cloud* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica), a thick, packed volume, could not exactly have been anticipated from his earlier work, and some of it may take some getting used to. He seems to be enjoying the exhilaration and compulsion of an orphic seizure in which every thought and feeling runs the risk of becoming a poem. At its best, some of the work achieves the Romantic ideal of redeeming the banal, and there are many unquestionable triumphs, as in the epistolary love poems with a yearning music. The general impression of a cherished, even cultivated spontaneity seems to derive in part from certain aspects of American poetic tradition, but there is also the acknowledged influence of modern jazz. Jazz, working with West Indian folklore and folk wisdom, is also an important factor in Shake Keane's little suite (or 'Rhymes and Notes' as he calls it), *One a Week With Water*, which won a Casa de las Americas prize and was published in Havana by Casa. Also winning a Casa prize was Andrew Salkey's *In the Hills Where Her Dreams Live* ('Poems for Chile, 1973-1978', Havana: Casa de las Americas). Edward Brathwaite compiled *New Poets from Jamaica* (Kingston: Savacou), the anthology being a special double-issue of Brathwaite's journal *Savacou*. The poems cover a fairly wide variety of moods and voices and include the performance-oriented work coming out of the urban proletariat, with the strong influence of the protest language and music of that group. A heartening feature which runs through much of the poetry mentioned in this report is a genuine, serious experimentation. It is also pleasing to see that more than half of the poets in the Savacou anthology are women.

EDWARD BAUGH



Edward Bragh teaches English at the University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica. He is editor of *Critics of Caribbean Literature* and has published a book on Derek Walcott, *Derek Walcott: Memory as Fiction*.

## CANADA

Several established writers, many of whom first made their reputations in the seventies, have published important new books this year.

Margaret Atwood's novel, *Life Before Man* (McClelland & Stewart), has received the most publicity, but doesn't really break new ground. Atwood seems to have secularized Purgatory and located it in Toronto in 1978. Her characters, all of whom visit or work at the Royal Ontario Museum, are presented as people under glass, fossils of the 1960s, who continue going through the motions of living, but are essentially dead. They are hollow people beyond Eliot's imagining, difficult to accommodate within the traditional novel without verging into either bitter satire or soap-opera sentimentality, and Atwood's control sometimes slips. She seems to be trying to expand her scope and move beyond the temptation to mere cleverness, but she hasn't yet found her balance as a novelist. Her talents seem better suited to poetry.

While Atwood uses the museum to represent the lessons and the dead weight of the past, Clark Blaise in *Lunar Attractions* (Doubleday) balances the archaeologist's belief that 'everything is precious' against the Romantic art of historical reconstruction; both are part of the museum's presentation of the past to the present and of the artist's attitude to his art. The autobiographical format, the Florida childhood, and the furniture store business are familiar from other Blaise narratives, but here they are joined into a more conventional structure: a three part Bildungsroman in which the narrator, David Greenwood, slowly pushes back the 'borders of permissible innocence'.

Like Blaise, David is fascinated by the interactions between the worlds of fact and myth, the pull of the everyday and 'lunar attractions', and the mystery of identity. The sensational story of Laurel and Larry Zywotko and the mutations which David's last name undergoes represent Blaise's attempt to convey the complexity of what Patrick White would call 'our several lives'.

Jack Hodgins' second novel, *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* (Macmillan) also explores the interactions between dream and reality, miracle and disaster, but in the manner of the magic realists. There is a Western exuberance and optimism in Hodgins' work which contrasts sharply with the Eastern voices of Atwood and Blaise. Where Atwood's theme is boredom and Blaise's fear, Hodgins celebrates vitality and love. Regionalism has always been a strong force in Canadian writing, yet despite these regional differences, each of these three writers speaks with a contemporary voice, expressing the dominant concerns of our time with energy and authority.

In contrast, Hugh Hood is deliberately out of tune with his times. *Reservoir Racine* (Oberon), the third novel in his projected twelve volume epic cycle entitled *The New Age*, integrates personal, national, and universal history into a Christian design which values each detail in itself and for its contribution to the harmony of the whole. Sometimes it works; sometimes it leads to laborious over-writing and a tedious barrage of facts. Hood aspires to be our Spenser and our Dante. He hasn't yet convinced me he can fill that role or even that we need Canadian versions of these writers, but his work raises intriguing questions, which we must continue to confront, about the nature and function of art in a new country.

Mavis Gallant also stands somewhat apart from the mainstream. Her detached narrative stance, European settings and underplaying of story and emotion have in the past rendered her an unattractive subject for



critics interested in the typically Canadian or in the isolation of national themes. Her new collection of stories, *From the Fifteenth District* (Macmillan), further strengthens her reputation for a craftsmanship which is both unobtrusive and compelling.

*Crossings* (Vancouver, Pulp Press), a first novel by the playwright Betty Lambert, has attracted attention for its lively re-working of the artist as troubled young woman theme. The dialogue is good, and it's mostly dialogue, but there is little substance here. Pretentious but promising.

New collections of poetry from established older poets, Raymond Souster and Irving Layton, and from well-known younger poets, most notably Dennis Lee, Michael Ondaatje and George Bowering, have all appeared this year. Each of these books represents a consolidation of earlier work rather than the taking of new directions, but there is excellent poetry among them.

Layton dedicates *Droppings from Heaven* (McClelland & Stewart) to Louis Dudek, who prefers Layton the social satirist to Layton the visionary. As we would expect from such a dedication, the poetry is mainly angry satire. There is none of the mystifying complexity of the earlier Layton, and little of his subtlety. Except for a few impressive poems, like 'Senile, My Sister Sings', this is not Layton at his best.

Souster's *Hanging In* (Oberon) gives us a competent poet writing the kind of poetry he is known for: short lyrics about everyday happenings or imagist moments modelled on Williams' red wheelbarrow spoken in a quiet, colloquial voice. He is a good balance for Layton, as their concerns are similar but their techniques differ: instead of raging, Souster pokes gentle fun.

Dennis Lee's *The Gods* (McClelland & Stewart) demonstrates the range of a versatile and committed poet, but it will be remembered for its inclusion of the long elegy on 'The Death of Harold Ladoo'. This poem is a long meditation on the significance of the Anasi years, and on relationships among artists and between art and reality. Lee strikes just the right balance between personal emotion and public statement. It is a moving and impressive achievement. The waste, the futility, the illusions and self-delusion are recognized and incorporated into the final vision, along with the knowledge that 'speaking the words out loud has brought me close to the bone' and the hope that men will be called on again 'for passionate awe in our lives, and a high clean style'. Hearing Lee read this poem was one of the highlights of my year.

The new poems in Ondaatje's collection, *There's a Trick with a Knife*

*I'm Learning to Do: Poems 1963-1978* (McClelland & Stewart), which is two-thirds old poems, are less ambitious in scope and possibly more distrustful of our ability to communicate through language alone. They are fascinating lyrics, which experiment with mood and voice, and delight in the play between language and thought. Ondaatje improves with each new volume.

Bowering's *Another Mouth* (McClelland & Stewart) is more uneven. I prefer his sardonic voice to his lyric one (his satire is brilliant), and his longer poems to the shorter. His earlier long poem 'Allophanes' is one of the nine contemporary Canadian long poems included in *The Long Poem Anthology* (Coach House) edited by Michael Ondaatje. This collection brings together important but lesser known long poems by poets whom Ondaatje in his introduction calls the 'unofficial' voices of the 70s, accompanied by brief critical commentaries by the poets, biographical details and a selective list of criticism about their work. It's an excellent anthology for anyone interested in contemporary Canadian poetry.

Although drama has never been strong in Canada, some of the year's more memorable plays have been Rex Deverell's *Boiler Room Suite*, Roland Lepage's *In a Lifetime* and David Fennario's *Balconville*, all published by Talonbooks. Canadian Theatre Review Publications have brought out the second volume in their historical series *Canada's Lost Plays*, entitled *Women Pioneers*, ed. Anton Wagner, and Playwrights Co-op have published a *Supplement, 1975-76* to their *Bibliography of Canadian Theatre History*, ed. Ron Ball & Richard Plant.

Two new critical books for the student market provide useful surveys of the old established canon of Canadian writers. D. J. Dooley's *Moral Vision in the Canadian Novel* (Clarke, Irwin) is designed as a corrective to conventional Canadian criticism, which has concentrated on national identity and theme to the exclusion of a concern with literary or moral issues. The book definitely serves a need, raising more questions than it can answer and forcing all of us to formulate our own positions more clearly. Tom Marshall's *Harsh and Lovely Land: The Major Canadian Poets and the Making of a Canadian Tradition* (University of British Columbia Press) is less controversial, but a solid and stimulating introduction to its subject.

At a more specialized level, readers who are already well versed in Canadian writing will find *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*, ed. Dick Harrison (University of Alberta Press) essential for considering some of the directions Canadian studies

may be taking in the 80s.

1979 was a productive year for Canadian writing. Many good writers are in the middle of their careers and we may expect further development from them. We can only hope that predicted cutbacks in government funding to some publishers and those experimenting in the arts will not limit their development or prevent the work of newer writers reaching our attention.

DIANA BRYDON



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## SOUTHERN AFRICA

Publishing in English in Southern Africa has never had a firmer or more propitious decade than the 1970s. Before then creative works in English had traditionally first appeared in the U.K. and/or the U.S. — a pattern established in the 1820s or earlier and which was broken, at first fractionally, only after World War II. Since then, local publishers like Howard Timmins, entering the conservative book-market (mostly with factual books of local interest) have slowly gained a corner of the market for Southern African authors writing in English. The 70s saw the rise of the literary publisher and, with him, the rise of the Southern African English author writing for his or her own publishing industry.

This is still a novelty for the new generation; older writers continue to publish abroad (with their books being re-imported) — Nadine Gordimer with Jonathan Cape and Viking, and Athol Fugard with Oxford University Press, for example. The Afrikaans-language writer, meanwhile, has two major publishing groups to choose from — Perskor and Nasionale — while the writer in a black vernacular language has almost exclusively their educational subsidiaries. In 1979, the pattern in English had fallen into a more varied one for literary works: there was David Philip in Cape Town, and Ravan, Bataleur, and Ad. Donker in Johannesburg to choose from, between them putting out about 50 literary works. Overseas publishers with well-established Southern African connections, like Heinemann Educational, Oxford U.P., Rex Collings and Macmillan, also continued to publish locally during the year.

From Heinemann Educational in the African Writers Series came Bessie Head's collection of stories, *The Collector of Treasures (and Other Botswana Village Tales)*, her fourth work, although within Southern Africa this first appeared as a hardback published by Philip. Also imported were the new novels of the two other novelists currently in most noted and mature production, Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* and André P. Brink's *A Dry White Season*. Although very different in style and structure, both novels have similar interests — the conflict between right and left, the repressive restrictions of the 'police state', and the ethos and penalties of political commitment to reform within the apartheid society. Both, for a while, encountered the modern South African gamble, which compels publication abroad for more direct and confrontative works — the elaborate and lethal system of censorship control. Although she had had some editions of two works of hers written in 1958 and 1966 belatedly released (*A World of Strangers* and *The Late Bourgeois World*), Gordimer had the predictable reversal of *Burger's Daughter* being banned and then, by some devious and unpredictable inner workings of the vast and inconsistent Publications Control Board, released.

The same occurred for Brink's *A Dry White Season*, which he wrote in both English and Afrikaans — the same Brink whose *Kennis van die Aand* (*Looking on Darkness*) banning earlier in the decade, together with the imprisonment of his fellow Afrikaans writer, the poet Breyten Breytenbach, heralded the first onslaught against Afrikaans writers. Previously unscathed, 1979 saw the works of Afrikaans writers banned in about equal proportions to those in English by both blacks and whites, thus relegating them as well to the role of outsiders, as their English

counterparts have been on a selected basis for two decades.

The return of Ezekiel Mphahlele to South Africa brought more anomalous developments in the on-going and bitter censorship saga. Although he as a person was not banned when he went into exile, unlike many of his compatriots of the 1950s, two of his works were repeatedly banned (*The Wanderers* and *The African Image*). His third novel, *Chirundu*, first appeared in 1979, daringly published by Ravan in paperback (he has changed his name to the Sotho Es'kia Mphahlele), and remained unscathed. From the same stable a first collection of stories by Mtutuzeli Matshoba (*Call Me not a Man*), which is more blatantly critical than Mphahlele's novel, was suppressed after selling 5,000 copies, while two works, both firsts, from Ravan in a single volume, Neil Alwin Williams' *Just a Little Stretch of Road* and Phazel Johannesburg's poems (*The Rainmaker*), both strongly expressive of black consciousness tenets, slipped through.

Also from Ravan came the third novel by miniaturist Yvonne Burgess; although little known abroad (her *The Strike* is due for release in New York), her *Say a Little Mantra for Me* achieved a pleased readership in South Africa and her first novel, *A Life to Live*, was paperbacked by Donker. He also gave out a first novel, *The Sons*, by David Abbott, which for seamy social realism hit a new and somewhat turgid level of frankness in South African English dialect, so bastardized as to be incomprehensible to a reader not familiar with Afrikaans and other languages as well — an example of how a work written for his own home readership can now be written in its own language.

The same is true, pretty well, of a novel like Burgess', and fiction by others like Sheila Roberts, Peter Wilhelm, Ahmed Essop, Lionel Abrahams, Christopher Hope, James Matthews, Mochobi Mutloatse, Mbulelo Mzamane, Richard Rive, Barney Simon. Although none of them published a new book-length work in 1979, it is they who constitute the new prose writers of the 70s.

Being a relatively small literary scene, however, it would seem that the pressures of life in Southern Africa force writers into being more versatile than they would perhaps like to be. An example is Sipho Sepamla who, together with Mongane Serote, Oswald Mtshali and Mafika Gwala, is a black poet of stature who commands a large audience. In 1979 he debuted with a novel, *The Root is One* (from Collings, co-published in South Africa by Philip), a probing, low-profile examination of a riot situation, clearly allegorizing the events of Soweto 76. Another poet, though younger, Christopher van Wyk, put out his raunchy *It Is Time to Go*

*Home* (Donker) and his first short stories in the little magazines.

The converse is the established novelist who kicks out the poems on the side: in this case, Jack Cope (who had not published a book of poems since 1948), the general editor of the Mantis Editions of Southern African Poets series (now numbering the work of 14 poets), included his own *Recorded in Sun* in a companion volume with fellow novelist, G. J. Driver's *Occasional Light*. Although Driver is generally numbered among the long-lost compulsory or voluntary exiles (like Jillian Becker, Dan Jacobson, Peter Abrahams among novelists, and Dennis Brutus, Keorapetse Kgositsele and Mazisi Kunene among poets — the whites usually having evacuated by choice and the blacks usually without choice), the collection of his poems, gleaned mainly from South Africa's little magazines, fortuitously stressed the cumulative role that is played by such magazines, often publishing furtively, even clandestinely — always in perilous circumstances, ranging from the obvious censorship hazards to the purely financial. The two are not unrelated, for no English magazine publishing receives any form of sponsorship other than private support.

The magazines that functioned through 1979 were, in fact, only a few, and ailing. The record-holder for longevity is *Contrast*, founded in 1960, which managed only one number (no. 47) during the year. Magazines like *The Purple Renoster*, *Ophur*, *The Classic*, *Ixus*, *Bolt*, *Donga* were distantly remembered, and *Speak* plunged, while *New Classic* skipped the year; *Sketch*, the magazine of black theatre, on the other hand, resurfaced with one number. Only *Staffrider*, under Ravan's protection and mostly given over to black community writing, maintained a head (two numbers). Two new reviews were announced, *Heresy* and *Wietie*, the former with one number and the latter to come from a new mostly-black publishing outfit, Sable Books.

Amongst academic reviews/magazines, *Standpoints* (published and financed by Tafelberg, mostly Afrikaans, all but exclusively white), now over thirty years old, maintained schedules and included some creative work and articles on English South African writing. Other reviews are related to university publishing; *Theoria* from the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) and *English Studies in Africa* from the University of the Witwatersrand maintained sombre standards, including evidence of the burgeoning English South African scholarship which is beginning to spill into such magazines with impact and influence — English South African literature is, perhaps, discovering itself critically and 1979 was the first year of climbing on the new bandwagon. The only magazine

devoted exclusively to scholarship of African English literature (largely Southern African), *English in Africa*, attached to the Institute for the Study of English in Africa of Rhodes University, Grahamstown, exuded sweet printers' silence, but had its two numbers per annum backlog for 1978 and 1979 scheduled for catching up in 1980. Pretoria's University of South Africa's *UNISA English Studies*, which has cut down to two numbers per annum, continued to publish reviews and some articles on local publishing with reliable success.

It was an average year, one might say, beset with the normal old problems. Dramatically rising costs of printing, however, caused indirectly by the energy crisis, cut budgets, reduced sales, made all publishers and editors more cautious of taking risks. On the other hand, the popularity of a writer like Herman Charles Bosman (d. 1951) was unaffected; the year saw his complete works in print from Human and Rousseau for the first time, in a standard series now numbering twelve volumes (including selections). But there was one new tack in 1979 in the overall pattern that had prevailed throughout the seventies.

That was the publishing in book form of drama scripts. In the past the smaller readership for plays and the relative lack of publicity accorded the local playwright outside his own area of performance (Fugard is the huge exception, but all his scripts are available from the wider world) had created an impasse — plays simply were not published beyond the magazines and the reviews. But if the seventies saw the rise of the new generation of prose writers and poets in English, it also spawned an unprecedented amount of local theatre, by playwrights of all colours, and this pushed through the publication taboo as well.

Ravan led with four modestly-produced playscripts in a series of individual publications (*Not His Pride* by Makwedini Julius Mtsaka, *The Fantastical History of a Useless Man* by the Junction Avenue Theatre Co., *Lindiwe* by Shimane Solly Mekgoe and — her second play — *The First South African* by Fatima Dike). Donker responded with a five-in-one collection, *Theatre One*, including Dike's first play, *The Sacrifice of Krell*, Douglas Livingstone's *The Sea my Winding Sheet*, and a previously unscripted experimental play by Fugard, *Orestes* (first performed in 1971). Also included was the prolific Pieter-Dirk Uys's *Paradise is Closing Down*, and his smash-hit multilingual satire that ran throughout the year, *Die Van Aardse van Grootoor*, was put out in a single volume by Taurus.

A footnote about Taurus. Founded by three reckless academics as a samizdat outfit, functioning by mail order in a semi-clandestine way to

avoid the prohibitions, and thus inhibitions, that apply to all 'commercial' publishing, Taurus publishes on the risky principle of getting rid of stocks along the grapevine before the axe falls. Thanks to a snarl-up of legal niceties, this process does not appear to constitute 'publication'. There is not one South African English-language publisher who has not thought of giving up 'publishing', in the accepted sense of the word, at one time or another, thanks to the controls which attempt to manoeuvre the literature into the shape it has resisted assuming throughout the 1970s.

STEPHEN GRAY



Stephen Gray teaches English at Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg. He has modestly refrained from mentioning his own publications in his review. One was a work of criticism, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*, the other a volume of poetry, *Hottentot Venus*. Both books were published by Rex Collings and will be reviewed in the next issue of *Kunapisa*. The title poem of *Hottentot Venus* appears in this issue.

Editor's note. We apologize for the absence of entries on East and West Africa and hope they will appear in the next issue.



# Correspondence

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Objecting to some interpretations in my review of his book *Ethnic Radio* (Kunapipi 1.1) Les Murray asks whether he has really written 'so loosely and equivocally' as to justify them. This, I think, is not quite the point. Les, as my review points out, relies heavily on a certain Delphic brevity, on the expunging of explanatory and connective tissue. He is not in my opinion more obscure than other major poets, but he is so in a different way. Most twentieth-century poets play more or less by the rules of Leavis's 'intentionalist fallacy' argument, like T. S. Eliot who was almost never known to endorse or reject a critic's interpretation. Les, by contrast, tends to have a clear notion of the 'right' interpretation of even his more Delphic lines; and to his credit he is usually willing to explain it.

But, like Experience, he keeps a hard school. The reader who fails to work out what's going on in a poem like 'The Buchre Game' or 'Dedication for the Vernacular Republic' is expected to blame his or her own defective sense of reality, or ignorance of the environment described. The problem is that if one does have a slightly different sense of reality, or comes from a different Australian background or half-generation, some of Les's references may be less clear than he intends.

For instance he blames me for want of human sympathy in failing to guess the correct interpretation of 'flat food round the midriff, long food up your sleeves, in his poem 'Employment for the Castes in Abeyance'. Presumably he hasn't checked the context of this line which he attributes to another poem. In fact it seems to me that it would be a lucky rather than an astute reader who could guess the intended meaning.

I also think that Les often flaunts controversial ideas, but is inclined like any experienced controversialist to shift ground slightly when attacked. For instance, my brief reference to his 'prematurely confident assertion' that

machine translation never happened:  
language defeated it. We are a language species.

draws a long reply beginning: 'The assertion that machine translation hasn't yet been a success is justified by my researches into the matter.' But in Les's terse style the three flat statements in the lines quoted above sound like a great deal more than a mere *pro tempore* report that machine translation hasn't yet been a success. I was interested in fact to find him confirming my suspicion that there was a theological as well as a linguistic element to his suggestion that machines can't translate human language. It still seems to me that this sort of implied negative prediction is as unwise as most others of its kind, especially at the start of the computer age.

There are also problems with local idiom. For instance I once asked Les if there was any special meaning to the phrase 'prime brush land' in his poem 'Laconics'. To the best of my recollection he replied that in his part of the country it had the established meaning of 'rainforest country'. Accordingly I accepted the poem as being about the clearing of

rainforest — an important point. Les in his reply rejects this interpretation, asserting that *brusk land* 'refers to a soil type'. Simple though the misunderstanding may have been, it illustrates one of the dangers in turning to an author for the explanation of a poem.

There is understandably a certain apologetic tone about Les's long defence of his poem 'Cwdeitar' in which he set up the straw-man of a reformed spelling of English so clumsy as to justify his own prejudices against reform. I don't intend to point out the flaws (as any educated Dutchman, Portuguese, Spaniard, Greek etc. could do) in Les's various attempts to prove that it's impracticable to update spelling. What is more worrying, especially in a professed democrat, is his tendency to gloss over the social issues. For instance, the existence of two million adult illiterates in Britain in 1974 strikes him as normal.

In a population of fifty million, that's four percent, which is pretty much the standard proportion everywhere, in countries with phonetic spelling systems and with idiosyncratic ones. It represents the unfortunates whom teachers call ineducable, the sub-normal, the severely dyslexic, certain of the severely handicapped, etc.

This reads like the bumph of a conservative educationalist. In fact two million adult illiterates in a total population of fifty million works out to very much more than 4% illiteracy. In any case it would be callous and implausible to write off 4% of the human race as incapable of learning to read. Most Italian or Spanish-speaking educationalists would query that even 1% of their populations were so. True, the English-speaking countries, despite universal schooling and relatively princely educational spending, do have appalling illiteracy (and sub-literacy) rates. As the British government's recent report on illiteracy *A Language For Life* points out, it is not merely a matter of common sense but is 'amply confirmed by statistics' that the irregular spelling of English is a major obstacle to literacy, because the beginner has no reliable way to associate the written with the spoken word. The whole issue of course is one which people who have passed through the intense childhood indoctrination of an English-style education have great difficulty in thinking clearly about. But the point made with some care in my review was not that the flawed pattern of ideas in 'Cwdeitar' — one of Les's least satisfactory poems, was a fair sample of his achievement as a social philosopher but that it reveals certain important (and not always detrimental) tensions in his thought: between upbringing and crudition, common sense and common opinion, 'Boeotian' and egalitarian sympathies.

Les has caught me out, however, in a misreading of his poem 'A Sixties Future', which I took to be a satirical vision of a giant university that extends its apparatus of seminars, faculties, etc. to the cleaning and 'sub-technical' staff. In fact the vision is rather of an entire society so organized; and my comments are thereby rendered irrelevant.

Finally I should say that I can't quite accept Les's dismissal of 'radical' and 'conservative' as shoddy terms. They seem to me, like their close cousins 'left' and 'right' in the world of politics, to represent vague but real things — tendencies that can shape lives, states, and systems of thought as silently and surely as advancing glaciers. Which is not to say that the objective position is necessarily the one that seems middle-of-the-spectrum today, but merely that each of us has, and therefore needs to be aware of, his own temperamental bias.

MARK O'CONNOR

# Book Reviews

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Arthol Fugard, *Tsotsi*. Rex Collings, 1980. 168 pages. £5.

*Tsotsi* is a novel which Fugard wrote in 1959/60 at the same time as he wrote *People are Living There*, his first successful play. The manuscript has been kept in the National English Documentation Centre in South Africa from where it has recently been unearthed and published. It has had a measure of success in South Africa itself before its UK publication by Rex Collings.

It is always interesting to suddenly be confronted with an early work of an established writer, and in the case of Fugard it is very rewarding. *Tsotsi* contains all the major themes in Fugard's oeuvre, many of his virtues and some of his vices. It is also an outstanding example of that rare species in South African literature, the successful trans-racial character portrayal. It describes three days in the life of Tsotsi, a young black criminal in Sophiatown, during which he commits a murder, beats a friend to pulp, accidentally comes into possession of a baby which he reluctantly starts looking after, finds himself unable to commit a second murder, murses his beat-up friend, flirts with religion and finally meets his end. Like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* Tsotsi has no memory. He lives out his violent destructive life fighting an inner darkness which is a horror of existence, an awareness of the absurdity of life out of which he can see no other way than death which is his chosen refuge. His recovery of his past through a series of symbolic events in the violent, squalid and oppressed black township is an early example of Fugard's characteristic blend of political protest and existentialist philosophy. There is, however, a subtle shift in emphasis. Whereas Steve Bantu's identity problem in *Steve Bantu is Dead* is entirely the making of the political system, and Bantu's solution seems to be an acceptance of existential defeat to ensure physical survival, Tsotsi's gradual awakening first manifests itself in a new awareness of choice, of possible alternatives. This stops him in his tracks as he had always been 'the victim of dark impulses', and when he is unable to kill the beggar he realises that even 'killing itself was a choice'. The existentialist moment of choice, governed by man's free will is here regarded as at least a potential redeemer as is religion, and Tsotsi suffers Kierkegaardian anxieties.

Tsotsi's ultimate physical destruction seems relatively unimportant compared with his victory over life's absurdity, expressed in his choice of preserving life in the shape of the baby rather than spreading death. This somewhat optimistic belief in man's capability to shape his own destiny has been replaced by a more bitter vision of man's defeat in a hostile world in *Steve Bantu is Dead*. In this connection a comparison with Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* is instructive. The two novels resemble each other in their portrayal of black outlaws moving through the underworld of the township, but in Alex La Guma's version the tsotsis are helpless victims or inevitable outcomes of a specific set of social circumstances, in which the idea of choice is absurd. This obviously reflects his communist convictions, and it seems to me that La Guma's choice of the ordinary decons

stardweller as the carrier of hope is more convincing than Fugard's existential metamorphosis of a tomtom.

The Fugard virtues are to be found in style and technique. The novel is tightly controlled, every word serves at least one purpose, often several. The background is evoked in precise, vivid and poetic language which gives depth and meaning to the novel. Psychological states are expressed through dialogues of typical Fugard intensity and shortness, often consisting of keywords which for the speaker have a different and more precise meaning than their dictionary explanation, which makes them sound more like absurd monologues than dialogues, the Music Hall back-talk without the humour. The vice or perhaps just vice lies in the literariness of the book. In the symmetry and neatness of its symbolic structure it appears somewhat contrived. The symbols are obvious and stick out of the book like bones on a starving animal. Tsotsi's break-through to his past is built up to through a series of symbols: the smell of old newspaper, a spider, a yellow bitch, the too searching questions of the friend he beats up, the baby; in the second part where his childhood is reconstructed each symbol is carefully accounted for. Finally the baby is directly identified with his newborn self, giving heavy symbolic meanings to his attempts to hide it in derelict buildings or even kill it. This over-emphasis on getting your symbols right and consistent is perhaps the mark of a beginner, but it does not overshadow the fact that *Tsotsi* is a remarkable achievement and a very thought-provoking and enjoyable book by one of South Africa's leading writers.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

Mtshuzeli Matshoba, *Call Me Not A Man*. Rex Collings, 1980. 198 pages. £4.95.

This collection was first published in South Africa but was banned there in November 1979. Rex Collings had earlier agreed to publish it in the U.K. and copies had been despatched to them before the banning order was made. It thus is a good indication of what the present South African government does not want to hear. In an introductory autobiographical note the author states that he wants 'to reflect through my works life on my side of the fence, the black side; so that whatever may happen in the future, I may not be set down as a 'bloodthirsty terrorist'. The threat of violence which is implied in this purpose is absent in the book. The author states explicitly that he does not want war, he visualizes an 'army of justice', not necessarily belligerent, consisting of good people of all colours. This realization comes to the main character in 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' who is obviously the author himself, and it is a result of the impact of his first mixed party where for the first time he meets good whites. The main concern of the short story, however, is a visit to a political prisoner on Robben Island, and the story continues along not altogether unexpected paths of thought like 'Prison where is thy victory?' and 'A luta continua'. The tension between the two lines of thinking is not solved, neither in this particular story nor in any of the others. The subject matter covers the range of the only too well known black South African grievances: political persecution, slum conditions, gross injustice, corruption and bribery, prison labour on farms, including whippings and

starvation, the Immorality law, Bantustan, etc. They shed no new light on these subjects. The dominant feeling is that of indignation which adds to the predictability of both story and character. Doomed in amongst the plots are little tracts or discussions about such subjects as racism, tribalism, war, love/hate or Bantustans. It is a very sad fact that even the most appalling human conditions, presented by an obviously sympathetic author fail to arouse sympathy if either the presentation is bad or it has been said too often, both of which, unfortunately, is the case with *Call Me Not A Man*. In a South African connection, however, the protest of the book has obviously not been made often enough, and looked at in terms of a tool in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa itself it has already proved its worth by being banned.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Healers*. Heinemann, London, 1979 (first pub. East Africa Publishing House, Nairobi, 1978). 309 pages. Csd. £5.50, ppr. £1.80.

Ayi Kwei Armah's fifth novel, *The Healers*, explores the degeneration of African society in a historical setting. The bardic voice which introduces the tale informs the reader that the time is just over a century ago and the place close to the river Pra. Against the background of Wolsley's expedition against the Asante and the fall of Kumase, Armah deals with the men whose mission is to heal the spirit and to unite a people fragmented by nationalism and by their manipulative rulers.

A summary of the events in the novel reads like the plot of a historical thriller. Densu, wildest and strongest of his age group, escapes trial by poison for a murder he did not commit, and on a roving commission to gather information for an Asante general and for the healers he infiltrates the white camps, marches with the Asante army and is present at the fall of Kumase before returning to face trial before a white judge and be exonerated after a dramatic courtroom appearance by the victim's mother.

But *The Healers* is not the tale of adventure which this bald summary might suggest. Armah's moral concern pervades the narrative.

Densu himself, in spite of his ubiquitous presence at the scene of any great event, is not so much a hero at the centre of the action as a moral observer, an onlooker watching history unnoticed from a shadowy corner. The action-packed plot is only a vehicle for Armah's analysis of the personal and social moral failings which lie behind the history. Like Armah's fourth novel, *Two Thousand Seasons*, this work is dominated by his perception of a people in error, a people wandering from the true path of life. But where *Two Thousand Seasons* makes the arrival of the white slavers an automatic trigger for the rise and immediate success of the freedom fighters, *The Healers* is more closely located in historical time and place, and its solutions are those which work only over many ages. Armah postulates the existence of a group of healers, psychotherapists of society, who work slowly to heal the spiritual diseases of their community with no hope of immediate success.

Armah's vision of the role of the healers takes shape through the conversations of the characters. In one of the more successful scenes, the casual joking between age mates modulates into a sense of wonder as Dema is offered his friend's vision of the world below the surface of the stream. The friend, who has closed his eyes and assumed a foetal position underwater, talks serenely of the happiness of seeing what brings things together, but Dema is entranced by the experience only temporarily. Dando, too, talks of the healer's different way of seeing the world. In Dema's growing understanding of what a healer is and does, in the general's conversations about his illness and what it reflects of the disease of the Asante people and in the debate among the healers about what their role should be we learn that healing is inspiration, its opposite is the manipulation practised by those who seek power. Manipulation is a poison which enslaves and destroys its object, as the brainless giant who is the real murderer is destroyed by his servile obedience to Ahabio.

The division between manipulators and inspirers raises the question of the extent to which the healer is justified in working manipulatively to gain a greater good. It seems to some of the healers that the general's inspiring leadership might prove to be a viable alternative to the existing forms of power, but Armah dismisses the possibility when the general is betrayed by the royal manipulators. Instead the premise for the future lies in a more nebulous hope: the whites' attempts to destroy the unity of the African nations is beginning to scunner the whole African people in a new dance, to West Indian music.

*The Healers* is a novel of uneven achievement. The attempt to cover the political background of the attack on Kumasi does not always merge happily with Armah's visionary presentation of the Manichean struggle between manipulators and inspirers, and at times even the absence of dramatic tension in the writing and the constantly judgemental depiction of character cannot prevent the novel from coming perilously close to the clichés of the adventure story. Yet it remains a valuable novel and an interesting development of Armah's thought.

ROSEMARY COLMER

Philip Curtin, Steven Feierman, Leonard Thompson and Jan Vansina, *African History*. Longman, London, 1978. 612 pages, £9.75.

The stateless societies, which Europeans found in Africa, were one of the main reasons behind the myth that Africa was the continent without history. People without elaborate states were considered backward. 'Recent authorities', write the authors of *African History*, 'suggest that this view is far from accurate. At some levels of technology, state administration may only serve to draw off part of the social product for officials and courtiers who contribute little to that product.' 'Statelessness was clearly preferred' (p. 82).

Stateless societies created special problems for the European invaders as well as for the historians. 'Because there was no one to make a formal surrender, there was also no one to survive in office.' The Europeans could try to accept the «surrenders» of important people, but in fact no one had the power to make more than a personal decision to

cooperate with the new rulers. 'In this setting, separate reactions to European rule and European power had to be made by individual men and women, a process that is better illustrated for Ibo country by Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* than by any formal works of history' (p. 465).

Aiming at a broader conception of the nature of history than is found in books of the history of other continents the authors of *African History* have succeeded in creating a synthesis which gives the reader a better comprehension of African societies than perhaps any other single volume of history. The book, designed as a textbook for courses in African history, is distinguished from previous general histories by two features: the authors are 'less interested in the deeds of the great than in the culture and behaviour of ordinary people' less in events and more in the patterns of historical change. And they are 'consciously' seeking to look at African history from an African point of view'. This attitude is not new, but the book probably contains less political history and more about stateless societies, culture, economics, more ethnographic and social anthropology material than any other work of comparable size.

*African History* is divided at about 1500, 1780 and 1880 into four parts of which the first three are organized by regions. North Africa, East Africa etc. With colonial rule the patterns of African history became general for all regions, and the colonial period is treated in a series of topical chapters. For obvious reasons the goal of creating a synthesis is best reached in the last part and in the introductory chapter on the roots of African culture. In this chapter Jan Vansina questions or discards a number of theories on race, language, the spread of iron-age-culture etc. which were held until a few years ago. The theory that divine kingship developed in Egypt and spread from there into the East African lake country or westward beyond Lake Chad is discarded, and the similarity between African states is explained by a theory of saturation. After the rise of kingdoms in different parts of the continent they began to exchange ideologies, etiquette, insignia and roles. After a thousand years the kingdoms ended up more similar than they were at the beginning.

The oral tradition and the Arab or European sources are concentrated around these African states. Because of the present book's emphasis on trends rather than on events they are not given equal importance. But in the choice of which states or events are considered important there seems to be a certain lack of consistency.

In the chapters about West Africa the old states of Mali, Kanem and Songai are dealt with in a few pages, which seems quite reasonable. In the nineteenth century a good deal of attention is given to Usman dan Fodio and Samori Ture and his short-lived 'empire', while for instance the Asante confederacy is left out in the cold. On the map of West Africa in the early nineteenth century Greater Asante is shown as including the coast, which may be right for a short period. The century however was characterized by a southern limit of Asante power, the threats of Asante invasion in the Fante country and several military clashes between the British and their Fante allies on the one side, Asante on the other. It is impossible to understand today's antagonism between the coastal population of Ghana and the Asante population without a better account of these events than the few remarks found in the book. Moreover the interested reader finds little to explain the tenacity of Asante nationalism, described by Dennis Austin in 'Politics in Ghana' as 'a Kumasi centred Ashanti movement, which appealed for support in the name of the Asantehene, The Golden Stool, Ashanti interests, Ashanti history and Ashanti rights'.

Like most multi-authored works the book is characterized by a certain unevenness. Jan Vansina's chapters on Equatorial Africa are rather short, and Steven Feierman's chapters on Eastern Africa seem to assume too much knowledge of the background. All the same the book includes so much new information which has been gathered in the last decades about the African past that it has few rivals among shorter general histories of Africa.

SVEN POULSEN

Ulla Schild (ed.), *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch*, XXIX, 2-3. Stuttgart: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen. Special Double Issue: 'Afrikanische Literatur — Perspektiven und Probleme'.

In her vigorously committed introduction to this wide-ranging collection of essays on most of the major African literatures Ulla Schild claims that 'Coming to terms with (African literature) is the right and the duty of everyone who is interested in literature at all'. This statement might seem a little doctrinaire ('Recht und Pflicht' are terms from a literary arsenal one doesn't associate with literary tolerance) but it should be understood as the pardonably impassioned manifesto of a scholar who is doing much to make African culture known to a reluctant central Europe. Whatever their weaknesses, these two volumes reflect in their range the energy and enthusiasm of their editor. The inclusion of essays on literatures in the main African languages as well as on those in all the relevant European ones distinguishes this work from comparable productions.

The essays are of two types: original and sometimes controversial statements of opinion and summaries of a given field. Of the first type Aliko Sangole's questioning of Jahn's Muntu-concept is the most interesting. Muntu, he feels, forces a vast range of heterogeneous materials into a deceptively monolithic categorical structure. Eckhard Bechtelinger discusses rather modestly the problems of readership. Jürgen Schäder meditates on the place of African literature in German university curricula.

Essays of the second type face problems which are familiar to many who have attempted to write such introductions: the strain of summarizing a complex subject for a largely uninformed audience and the disproportion between subject matter and essay length. Two articles in the first volume illustrate in an exemplary way the difficulties and the possibilities of the genre.

Johannes Rien's article on francophone literature falls into many of the traps, especially into that of using hazy plot summaries as the basis of generalizations which are either too sweeping or too trivial to yield any sense of insight. Correspondingly, the language wavers between the pompous ('...bestimmte von unabwiderstlicher Notwendigkeit und schicksalhafter Verkettung der Ereignisse') to the banal (what conceivable reader needs to be told that a recurring theme in African literature is 'the conflict between the traditional African setting and European civilization?'). Characteristic is the piling up of parallel linguistic structures to stress the unstressable. This wall of rhetoric seems to be intended to conceal a European critic's loss of confidence on finding himself up against a literature which defies his accustomed norms.



Dieter Riemannschneider's account of the anglophone literature of the Seventies forms a total contrast to this. He is securely in command of the material so that he can choose without fuss what points to emphasize and how to illustrate them, and he justifies his procedure in a crisp methodological introduction. His language is clear, straightforward and unpretentious and therefore well suited to the task of introducing (and attracting) new readers to African literature. His arrangement is thematic, not chronological, so that the reader can follow the logical pattern of generalization and particularization without being jerked through a maze of disparate ideas. Other writers such as Claude Wauthier on political literature, Donald Burgess on the literatures of Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe and Nancy J. Schmidt on children's books also fulfil their purpose admirably.

In short the collection is rather uneven. But this is not the fault of the editor; the difficulty lies rather in the shortage of well-informed scholars who have the skill of imparting their knowledge to the sympathetic layman, and this in turn is due to certain gaps in the German (but not only the German) educational system. It is the editor's purpose to contribute towards the closing of such gaps. That her work inevitably suffers from the problems she is trying to solve is paradoxical and reflects not at all on her own courage, determination and thoroughness. One hopes that she will be given further opportunities to tune European ears to voices speaking European languages in unaccustomed ways and more alien languages in ways that can be highly relevant. Since Miss Schild has worked on the justifiable assumption that the interested German reader will be able to tackle essays in French and English, the collection has much to offer the non-German reader as well.

NELSON WATTIE

Wilson Harris, *The Tree of the Sun*. London: Faber & Faber, 1978.

Anyone with more than a passing acquaintance with Wilson Harris' work is aware by now that the amenities of conventional narrative — those tidy, more or less linear assumptions gathered around the words *complication*, *climax* and *dénouement* (or around the single word *plot*) — have long since been put aside. One could argue that this has been the case going back as far as Harris' very first published novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), but certainly by the time of *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965), his sixth, the decision to give freer rein to complication while pulling back (to make further use of such terms) on climax and dénouement, became a much more discernible one. All of Harris' works have tended to probe a world of tentacles, resolutionless complication, but with *The Eye of the Scarecrow* the exploration became much more self-conscious and self-reflexive, taking itself on as its own subject matter in fact. The novels which have followed *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, with the possible exception of *Tamatamani* (1968) and *Genesis of the Cosmos* (1977), have likewise let go of that merest thread of a remnant of story on to which the first five novels held ('story' in the sense of a sequence of events perceived as external to the writing and which the writing is therefore obliged to report as a progression, however complex, towards resolution).

From *The Eye of the Scarecrow* on, Harris' work — as though the only story worth telling

were Genesis and the genesis of art were of the same order of mystery as that of the universe, has invested deeply in a sense of story as a play of elaboration native to writing itself. *The Tree of the Sun*, Harris' fourteenth novel, is very much a continuation of this tendency, as again the attitude or conceptual act of which the novel is born reflects on itself by way of protagonists who are themselves artists and/or writers, as well as by way of allusions to some of Harris' earlier works. The novel has as one of its three central figures the Brazilian painter Da Silva da Silva, who first appeared in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (1977). Da Silva's wife Jen has finally become pregnant after eight years of marriage, and da Silva reflects on the painting, called 'The Tree of the Sun', which he began the same morning on which he and Jen slept together and she conceived. Figuring prominently on the canvas are the novel's two other central protagonists, Julia and Francis Cortez, previous tenants of the house in which the da Silvas live. The Cortezes, dead for some twenty-five years, are resurrected by da Silva's having happened upon a novel written by Francis and a volume of letters written by Julia hidden away in an inner wall of what is now his studio. Though Francis and Julia while alive wrote in secret, unknown to one another, da Silva's painting and Harris' novel become the occasion for a belated dialogue between the two.

But no such summation as this can possibly do justice to the staggering density and richness of Harris' book, whose title has partly to do with a restless, explorational pursuit of ramifications which constantly undoes any settled sense of what it can be said to be about. The peculiar, essentially poet's way Harris has with language again comes stunningly to the fore, visiting lightning-quick dislocations of a clairvoyant kind upon whatever it reports. Thus we get a persistent hurrying, an endless play between holding back and disclosure not at all unlike the way we imagine a ghost might move. And this is highly appropriate to a book which repeatedly insists upon itself as haunted or spooked, the issue of an intercourse between the living and the dead. Or as Harris has it of da Silva at one point: 'Perhaps it was an inescapable fiction or costume of possession, in the translation of other lives and letters and books, in which he was involved, as if he became the (soul) of past and present times in everliving presence or renascence of the arts.'

NATHANIEL MACKAY

Len Garrison, *Black Youth, Rastafarianism, and the Identity Crisis in Britain*. The Afro-Caribbean Education Resource Project, London, 1979. 68 pages. £1.50.

Len Garrison's long essay contributes a novel perspective on the influence and function of Rastafarianism, a messianic cult founded on a strict interpretation of selected passages from the Old Testament and a very loose interpretation of the teachings of Marcus Garvey. The major sources on Rasta' concentrate exclusively on the rise and development of the Rastafarian faith in the predominantly rural, Third World context of Jamaica. Garrison's subject is how well, and why, Rasta travels to the urban, industrial environment of Britain's West Indian immigrants.

The intimate link between Rastafarianism and reggae music has prompted interest

beyond the narrow confines of sociology and theology, and it is primarily through the lyrics of reggae songs that Black immigrants in Britain have come to know Rastafarianism. It is Garrison's hypothesis that this interest represents 'a subconscious attempt by the Black youth in Britain to provide an antithesis to the ... challenges and threat to his humanity' (p. 2). Although his perspective is strictly British, Garrison's arguments in fact provide (if such a thing were needed) a justification and rationalization of the activities of any minority group which actively resists integration.

Part I outlines the failure of cultural assimilation, while Part II deals in greater detail with the consequent 'Cultural Reversal and Separation' in the search for the meaning of being Black in a white society. The account of 'the Roots of Ras Tafari Historical Consciousness' in Part III is too brief to do justice to its subject. The reader who is unfamiliar with Rastafarianism would do well to consult one of the sources cited below first. In his attempt to depict the informal, oral tradition of Rastafarianism as a monolithic ideological construct, Garrison fails to come to terms with the escapist, self-deluding aspects of Rasta doctrine, i.e., that Haile Selassie (formerly Ras Tafari) is the Second Coming of Christ and that the repatriation of all Blacks to Africa is inevitable.

But Garrison's primary concern is not so much the form of Rastafarianism as it is its function in the ongoing redefinition of a Black identity in a culturally plural society, and on these terms the essay offers worthwhile insights into some possible alternatives to total cultural assimilation.

ALBERT L. JONES

## NOTES

1. For an annotated bibliography, see J. V. Owens, 'Literature on the Rastafari: 1955-1974. A Review', *Sources*, 11/12, Kingston, 1975. Important later studies include Joseph Owens, *Dread: the Rastafarians of Jamaica* (Sangster, Kingston, 1976) and Leonard E. Barrett, *The Rastafarians: the Dreadlocks of Jamaica* (Heinemann, London, 1977).

V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

*A Bend in the River* represents a further step in V. S. Naipaul's attempts to relate present to past experience. In earlier works of fiction and non-fiction — particularly *The Mimic Men* and *The Loss of El Dorado* — Naipaul turns to history for explanations of our present condition and for reassurance that what happens to the individual is not the result of mere cosmic whimsy. In articles such as 'A New King for the Congo' (*New York Review of Books*, 26 June 1975), which introduces many details that appear in *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul captures the absurdity and chaos he perceives as the lot of men in both former colonial and metropolitan societies. One of the goals of his fiction is to impose

order on the chaos; the narrator of *A Bend in the River*, Salim, seems to share in this longing. He keeps before the reader an awareness of the slave trade that was conducted in his part of Africa; he frequently recollects the other settlers and other eras at the bend of the Congo River where he becomes a shopkeeper; and he records the attempts of a European priest, Father Huismans, to preserve both the African and the European past of the area. But ultimately Salim fails to find in history or in the past the order or the reassurance he needs. The history of his family and of his people, Muslim migrants to Africa's east coast from the north of India, does not exist: 'the past was simply the past'. Neither is there an adequate recorded history of his part of Africa. Discussions at the home of a historian, Raymond, suggest that it may not be possible to preserve the truth of events even if one can discover that truth at the time they occur. And so, in the end, Salim must relinquish his vision of the past simply to live and do what is expected of him. He learns from his old friend Isidar (who tragically renounces his own teaching) that one must 'trample on the past'. And he learns from his love affair with Raymond's young wife Yvette that neither pleasure nor pain really matters: 'men were born only to grow old, to live out their span, to acquire experience'.

In this book the bleakness of Naipaul's vision is more than the result of his awareness of the dilemma of the post-colonial world in which all men seem rootless, without values and goals. The book is a complex investigation of the many types of dependence men place themselves in; a love affair is seen to be a form of enslavement and both are compared to relations between metropolis and colony in complex patterns of imagery. But Naipaul goes further to investigate the possibility of discovering the essence of truth or reality. After Salim's experience of jail and his observation of tortures there, he states the ambivalent attitude many of Naipaul's characters hold toward their bodies:

In a cell like mine you very quickly become aware of your body. You can grow to hate your body. And your body is all you have: this was the curious thought that kept floating up through my rage.

Not only in jail or in physical danger but in all situations, Naipaul seems to say, man can be certain of nothing but his own physical existence and that in itself makes him terribly vulnerable.

His civilisations are also vulnerable. When Salim arrives in England, he finds that European civilization is 'shrunk and mean and forbidding', threatened by the oil wealth of the Arabs. Past settlements at the bend in the river show that the situation of any society is precarious, subject to new threats; all that remains constant is the bush with its primitive vitality which Salim senses when he regards Huismans's collection of masks. A natural force, the hyacinths in the river, threaten to choke the river which has always been the highway of civilization into the bush. In the imagery of the novel the hyacinths bring different messages to Salim but always they are associated with the strength of primitive forces. It is, of course, at the same bend in the river that Conrad's Kurtz discovers 'the horror' in *Heart of Darkness*. Just as the hyacinths convey different messages at different times, so events of the past may be interpreted in many ways depending on the perspective of the historian. As the floating hyacinths are inescapable in their movement downriver, so is the progress of history, but both, Naipaul seems to suggest, lack a totally consistent and discoverable meaning. Furthermore, because the study of history is associated with civilized, highly organized societies, and the hyacinths with primitive, natural, or bush forces which threaten to overwhelm the precariously

sited outposts of progress, the hope that history can provide enduring comfort by ordering chaos, explaining the present through investigation of the past is denigrated.

Having considered history and come to question what actually is real, what is the truth, Salim decides that even the questions are pointless; all that matters is going on. And yet the effect of the book is less discouraging than this might suggest. In the first place, the characters are much more likeable than those of, for instance, *Guerrillas*, the novel published before *A Bend in the River*. Furthermore, in reading V. S. Naipaul's fiction, it is impossible to remain unaware of the creative presence behind the narrator. *A Bend in the River* is a brilliantly unified and coherent book, one in which an apparently straightforward narrative masks very complex patterns of imagery. Naipaul's readers are rewarded by discovery of the creative intelligence that controls and orders the raw materials which Naipaul records more objectively in his capacity as a journalist.

MARGARET NIGHTINGALE

Cyril Dabydeen, *Distances*. Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1977. 22 pages. \$2.00.

Cyril Dabydeen, *Goatsong*. Mosaic Press/ Valley Editions, 1977. 34 pages. \$3.25.

Cyril Dabydeen, *Heart's Frame*. Vesta Publications, 1979. 73 pages. \$4.50.

Cyril Dabydeen is a Guyanese writer, teacher and critic who came to Canada as a student in 1974 after having taught elementary school in Guyana for some years. He obtained degrees in English and Public Administration and is now living in Ottawa, where he has taught communication at a community college. Before leaving Guyana he published one volume of poetry, *Forms in Recursion* (Sadoek Press, Georgetown, Guyana, 1972). In Canada, apart from the above volumes, his poems and short stories have appeared in many of the literary magazines, and another volume of poetry, *This Planet Earth* (Borealis Press) has now been published.

*Distances* is a slim volume with an unattractive front cover which would be acceptable as an illustration for a book about unemployment in the industrial Midlands but does not have much to do with Dabydeen's poems of tropical growth and decay. The poems in this volume deal with the poet's roots, with the experiences of his childhood and youth, and with the difficulty of adjusting in a new country. There are closely observed scenes of emotion, poems about writing poetry, and ones in which the poet registers his own thoughts and actions. 'Poet Speaks to the Home' with its concise language, clear structure and pointed conclusion is a successful example of the latter, whereas a poem like 'Rancher' seems too personal for the reader to decipher. The best poems in this volume are those which, like 'Maestro' and 'The Fat Men', concentrate atmosphere, people and memory into images so full of meaning that they transcend time and place. In this volume Dabydeen's strength lies in his mastery of language and his ability to present scenes from his native Guyana through precise short sentences and careful observation.

His world is on the one hand the hot and humid coastal regions where birth and death, growth and decay are simultaneously present, with glimpses back into history and myth which bring to mind Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, and on the other hand Canada where he is the immigrant. In 'This Is It' he sounds almost like Margaret Atwood, but other Canadian poems show that he stands on his own feet in Canada as well. Images and language at times run away with the poet but in many of the better poems there is a competent handling of the material and an attitude which reminds the reader of V. S. Naipaul.

hewn to the pith  
you become the axe-  
man aware of the  
tribe's dialect.

These lines from 'Anthem', the last poem in *Goatsong*, can be used about Cyril Dabydeen both in his Guyanese poems and in his poems about immigrants to Canada, in which more than in *Dérances* he has found the dialect of his tribe. Themes and images from *Dérances* recur in *Goatsong*: the father-bull figure, the waiting mother, the Guyanese village people, the suicide theme, the adjustment process of the immigrant, but there is more 'singing' as announced in 'Goatsong', and the imagery is more controlled than in *Dérances*. 'Taurus', 'Absences' and 'Trail' are good examples of how the poet has brought more emotion and less cool observation into his poems, there is humour and vitality (cf. the Dylan Thomas influence), and also social commitment.

As the poem 'Encounter' tells us the Guyana we see is not the paradise world of *Green Mansions*, but a world full of snakes. There are idyllic village scenes, but they are juxtaposed with very personal poems about the poet's family which breathe protest against the violence and resignation. Yet, as the poems of transition show, this world still draws the emigrant who with two countries belongs nowhere. In this volume Guyana still seems to weigh heavier in his imagination than Canada and gives rise to a father-figure with mythical proportions, whereas many of the Canadian poems are observations by an outsider. Like the poems in *Dérances* the observations are accurate, at times ironic, but with a tendency just to place things in front of the reader to look at. With the poems about immigrants Dabydeen joins what is almost becoming a genre by itself in Canada, 'black literature in Canada', dealing with the life of West Indian, Asian and African immigrants.

In *Heart's Frame* Cyril Dabydeen develops themes from his earlier books, going deeper both into his Guyanese past, his British colonial heritage, and his present Canadian immigrant existence. The book is divided into three parts:

'Open Spaces' which creates a mythology of the Guyanese coastal region in which the Guyanese tropical rain forest and savanna become part of a mythical universe at times reminiscent of Dylan Thomas' world, the Greek myths, and of native legends;  
'Shapes and Shadows': a series of portraits and encounters,  
'Tropics' which contains a more personal picture of Guyana, seen and remembered by someone who lives between two worlds.

A few lines from 'Replenish the Day' give the essence of the first part of the book, 'Open Spaces':

Replenish the day  
with myth solidifying meaning  
at the firm edge of memory

In 'Open Spaces' a fertile new/ancient world region seething with life is given shape and meaning through the opposite elements of sun and rain. In Dabydeen's world the land and the people on it are exposed to elements which rule them as the Greek gods ruled their world. Man and nature in unity experience the dryness, hardness, strength, white light of the Sun god, a god who in Aztec and Inca times, i.e. in the past civilizations of the American Indians, was powerful and glorious, but who is seen by the present inhabitants as a power which must be endured until release comes with the rain. The sun gives associations of aloofness and hard brick walls, whereas the rain, the soft ground, the moon and stars bring closeness, touch, love. Through modern 'fairytales' and legends man's unity with this sun/rain world is shaped into a mythology where the opposites co-exist and balance. The balance is seen in the one of the last poems in this group entitled 'Solid Light':

Solid light  
night — sun  
flames — waters  
rock hard — opening ourselves to wounds

almost give a summary of the imagery 'Open Spaces' is built on and which personified becomes the god figures in the myth.

'Shapes and Shadows' consists of encounters and portraits from Canada, Guyana, and Europe. The poet is in these poems an acute, sensitive observer of his surroundings, who through his use of language and imagery recreates characters and situations. He writes poems of social commitment about the immigrants, the Native Indians, the poor, and he explores his own situation as an immigrant with roots in another world. In the poems about women there is more genuine emotion and less of the uncommitted distanced attitude found in his earlier poems. There is less unity in this part than in the other two due to the self-contained nature of these poems.

The poem 'Song' from the third section 'Tropics' links this group to 'Open Spaces' through its sun-moon, hardness/softness imagery. This imagery ties the poems of all three sections together and gives the more personal poems of 'Tropics' an added dimension, linking the fates of the individuals to the mythology of the country. Scenes from the Aboriginal Indian past, the European conquest, the poet's childhood, and the lives of Guyanese in Canada are all seen on the background of a country whose nature has shaped its people's identity.

There is more unity in this collection of poems than in the two earlier volumes, the poems reveal a remarkable sense of language without the somewhat artificial dictionary words and neat phrases which could be found occasionally in the earlier poems, and above all, there is a greater richness of themes and more exuberance in this volume.

INGER HASTRUP

Ediriweera Sarachchandra, *Curfew and a Full Moon*. A Novel about Sri Lanka, translated from the original Sinhala by the author. Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., *Writing in Asia* series, 1978. 223 pages.

In his novel *Curfew and a Full Moon* (his first fictional work to appear in English translation), Sarachchandra writes of Sri Lanka in April 1971, a time when an insurgent insurrection created a period of national emergency in the island. The story is set in the University campus at Peradeniya, where the author had himself held the Chair of Modern Sinhalese Literature, and its central character is a university don, a professor of archaeology, who finds his view of life and of himself profoundly changed by the experiences of 1971. Professor Amaradasa is thoughtful and sensitive, but his training has taught him to live in the past, when life (as he imagines it to have been) was ordered and beautiful. His sympathy for his students, some of whom are among the insurgents, forces him to face the ugly realities of life outside his tranquil intellectual retreat. The incidents in the novel correspond very closely to the nightmarish events that were kept out of Sri Lanka's censored newspapers but were made common knowledge by the ramifications of the island's local grapevine and have been confirmed by official documentation.

The novel does not itself strive for documentary realism, however. Sarachchandra's interest (like Lloyd Fernando's in writing of *Malayala* in *Scorpion Orchid*) is chiefly in the crisis of conscience through which 'Professor Amaradasa' must go before, at the end of the book, he joins the insurgents in their struggle to establish a new society. Although the novel is narrated in the third person, the action is viewed through his eyes, for the most part, as is the setting: in an experiment that does not quite succeed, Sarachchandra adopts strikingly figurative language, replete with elaborate simile and metaphor in the tradition of classical Sanskritized Sinhala literature to depict Peradeniya's lush landscape as it appears to the studious Amaradasa. In its attempt to deal in fiction with social change in the island, *Curfew and a Full Moon* must stand with Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*, Martin Wickremasinghe's Sinhala novel *Gata Peraliya* (*Change in the Village*) and Pansukante Wijeweera's *Geyya*. It is also a personal, valedictory poem written for an academic community that was once a true centre of learning and life.

YASMINE GOONERATNE

Albert Wendt, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*. Longman Paul, 1979. \$12.95.

In 1974 came from these same publishers Albert Wendt's brilliant and daemonic novella in the stories of that title, 'Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree'. Now, five years later, that gem reappears, in a complex setting, as the heart of this three-part novel, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*.

It is preceded by Part One, 'God, Money, and Success' — the title of his father Taullopo's 'Truly Inspired' (chap. 9) sermon — narrating Taullopo's rise to power over the village Sapepe and his acquisition and establishment of a large new plantation. *Leaves of*



the Banyan Tree, it is, in turn, succeeded (for his son, Pepesa, is about to die at the end of 'Flying-Fox') by Part Three, 'Funerals and Heirs'. In this Taulupepe attempts to establish succession of the estate in his grandson but, as he preaches again, in the very pulpit of the grandiose church he has built as memorial to Pepesa, yet another heart attack cuts him down and, by ingenious plotting, the spoiled young heir is disinherited and the fruits of a strenuous life-time go to the amoral, emotionless, existential anti-hero Galupo, 'Wave of the Night'; he is Taulupepe's bastard by a local store-keeper's wife brutally begotten at the end of Part One. On the final page, Galupo 'let the singling bubble up from the earth into his toes and up into his belly. Then, like sweet coconut milk, it surged up his chest and throat and out of his mouth. And he laughed for the power and the glory was his. Now.'

'Flying-Fox' is an irregular tessellation of highly symbolically titled parts — 'The Pink House in Town', 'A Haunted House in the Town', 'Trial of the Native Son' — unnumbered and told in laconic first person narrative by Pepesa dying of TB in the sanatorium. 'Outside the hospital window the bald-headed men are feeding their fire' of 'meat, guts, bits and pieces of people from the surgery department'. Their presence commences and concludes the story, and, just in case you do not recognize the allusion to Matthew xiii, 40-42 ('...so shall it be in the end of this world') the section 'Last Will and Testament of the Flying-Fox' (from which it is not far to 'Exit') contains his friend Tagata's (the 'Flying-Fox') farewell letter headed 'Judgement Day'. Contrastwise to the evidently uncalculated *bric-a-brac*, *sforsando* of this brief core (only seventy-three out of four hundred and thirteen pages), the numbered, calculated, carefully expository chapters of Part One, and the similar overtly developmental aftermath of Part Three cannot but in some degree become insipid, lacking in more than mere focus and concentration. This unfortunate contrast is further enforced by the absence of Pepesa's mild argot and flavoursome first person narrative and its substitution by an omniscient narrator who, like the 'eye of God' — surely hardly fitting in this existential world? — presents carefully formulated documentation ('The Price of Copra', 'Debtors and Gold', 'The Wage Battle', 'Business Men and Gon-Men Gelchewe' are some chapters) and methodical plot.

*Leaves*, in its origins (according to an interview in *World Literature Written in English*, April 1977), dates from about 1968 and has been cut from 'originally about 1,000 pages'. *Leaves* is also 'probably the only long novel I'll ever write; it was a large hunk of my life, some twelve years' and it is Wende's earliest attempt at long fiction of any kind, even ante-dating his first novel, *Sons for the Return Home* (1973). It curiously, then, blends both developed and undeveloped skills, both early and, possibly changing, later values.

There can be no doubt that, from Apia to Moresby, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* is the finest sustained work of fiction yet from the South Pacific: to me the contrast in the internal divisions is still marked.

What, as a Western reader, I find most disturbing here in Wende's created rural and urban Samoa of three generations is an almost total lack of what I, at any rate, recognize as 'humanity'. This is not merely the absence of Europe's (rightly?) cherished 'individuality' which seems so frequently absent from typical 'third world' ethos and fiction of 'situation'. It is the almost total absence in Samoan and 'palagified' worlds alike of any softness, gentleness, of 'love'. This is a heavy macho world of fights, fucks and, through the *palaga*, finance. I realize Wende's polemical purpose is indeed to show 'independent' Samoa 'as it really is'. But I can no more credit the deep truth of this picture than I can,

say, of the '50s New Zealand in John Mulgan's even more simplistically polemic (and truthful?) *Man Alone* (with which one can profitably contrast, say, Robin Hyde's same country at the same time in *The Godwits Fly* in the Polynesian world a possible similar contrast might be the very obvious 'humanity' in Patricia Grace). Simply, I think Albert Wendt's early, continuing, and selfless commitment to serving the arts in the political arena of the South Pacific over many years now has made him — like Tautoupepe! — substitute (in how different a causal) unconscious sermon for sincerity and, for creativity, (honest) propaganda. The characters demonstrate a thesis, the plot likewise.

I cannot help wondering also how relevant may possibly be Chinua Achebe's portrayal of the world of the Nigerian Ibo and its lop-sided exponent Okonkwo in his marvellous *Things Fall Apart*, sub-titled in America 'The Story of a Strong Man' and that most remarkable (from Achebe!) reference in its Chapter 16: 'Then the missionaries burst into song ... one of those gay and rollicking tunes of evangelism which had the power of plucking at silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo man' (my italics).

Quite early, in plot and in final sentence of *Soua For the Return Home*, Albert Wendt's debt to Albert Camus became apparent. In the interview cited he says 'I was made for Camus. I read Camus in high school and re-read him even now.' This becomes interestingly overt through the later chapters of 'Funerals and Heirs' in the speeches of Galupo — 'My mind is also the best, the most devious, the most heartless that papalagi books have produced in our sad country' — who in one place ('A Most Expensive Gift') appears to conflate Camus and Sartre (*Cabalgate* and *Kean*?), later quotes Camus in a context apt for Oceania — 'The opposition here is between magnificent human anarchy and the permanence of the unchanging sea' — and tragically affirms to himself 'all that was permanent and true was the darkness within, a darkness as beautiful as this sea, a darkness out of which all truth and power and glory sprang'. This is not what I understand Pepesa to mean when, in 'Trial of the Native Son', before the senile Black Dress palagi judge he affirms, 'I have the darkness and myself'. It does, though, fit the name given Galupo by his vengeful ruined mother. The 'philosophy' that powers Galupo, is fascinatingly outlined in Chapter 14, 'The Mythology of Night Wave' (what a book list on p. 366! — Camus, Dostoevsky, Japanese pornography, Dürer, Borges, etc.) who sees all others as 'Other-Worlders' and Fallen. True enough, and yet in that final chapter, 'The Time and the Place', the milky triumph (*Oedipal*? there is much to substantiate this) of that final page already quoted yields him only '... But you were correct in not loving anyone, in not believing in that sentimental Other-World crap. Love is a weakness'. And, next page, 'I am also ... a product of the history and whole movement propelling our country towards an unknown future. Or, shall I say, I am that future'. Not only obtrusive and theatrical but — false!

In *Islands* 26 Peter Crisp, reviewing Wendt's outstanding second novel *Pouliuli* (Albert Wendt: *Pathways to Darkness*) writes quite brilliantly of the force of Wendt's emergent themes — love betrayed, anti-hero, darkness. In *Leaves*, Wendt's earliest fiction in origin (though not in publication, there seems to me uneasy compromise between the promise of such radical depths and the dominance of surface realism (generalized) and a world of *realpolitik*, both, humanly and aesthetically to me less than adequate.

And yet, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, in sustained power of writing, sweep of incident, skill of plot is a view of the South Pacific — humourless, loveless, or not — that must be read and reckoned with. That great banyan tree may be cardboard, the climactic hurricane a matter of sound effects, and all characterization cramped into one obsessive

dogmatic over-riding pattern, yet the detail of island life, the undoubted realities of *palagi* exploitation, bigotry, and worse together with the heat, the plantation, the sea, the scenery, the night — all these do create a time, a place, the victims, with an authority that ensures this book a permanent place. As an impertinent — and ignorant — outsider I must acknowledge competence and commitment — but as reader of novels I regret the terms of that commitment.

PETER ALCOCK

Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair*. Jonathan Cape, London, 1979.

It was Pascal who remarked that the last act is always the bloodiest, and Patrick White's last novel, *The Twyborn Affair*, is certainly painful, even more so than most of his works which have been, in all conscience, painful enough. For what is at issue here is the spectacle of a man wrestling in public with his own soul. There is nothing else but this and in the event, he is defeated. In conventional aesthetic terms, the novel makes a poor showing: the story-line is discontinuous, confusing and often boring, while the tone is self-indulgent, often offensively so: the characters are stylised, more often targets for the novelist's desire to prove a point than centres of interest and exploration, and the wide range of narrative device, ranging from conventional third person narrative through stretches of dramatic dialogue, interior monologue and — as we have come to expect from White — dream sequences, draws attention to itself, suggesting a novelist who has fallen victim to his own virtuosity.

Why, then, should anyone be expected to pay much attention to this novel? Because, I suggest, the artist may be the Early Warning System of History, because this novel may have a grim prophetic value which we might all pay attention to. White has always had a great deal to say about and to Australian culture which it seems he has never been able either to live with or do without, but now it may be he presents a picture more universally significant. The Australian may be the type of everyman, in the sense of A. D. Hope's poem, 'Australia', a poem often quoted but little understood, even perhaps by the poet himself, when he characterised Australians as

...the ultimate men  
Whose boast is not We live; but we survive.  
The type which will inhabit the dying earth.

Thus in its own way *The Twyborn Affair* resembles Naipaul's new novel, *A Bend in the River* which equally implies that the colonial situation of disinheritance provides a general image of contemporary man, condemned to live in a world in which everywhere 'men are in movement, the world is in movement and the past can cause only pain since present and future seemed to be filled with violence and savagery'. But where Naipaul still holds on to some belief in civilisation and its values, paying tribute to them in the coherence and shapeliness of the form he devises to tell his story of disintegration, White seems to have lost this belief. His novel concludes inconclusively on a savage note with the

death of his protagonist in the blitz and with the novelist seeming to rejoice not only in this death which is not seen as a release into the world elsewhere which is posited in White's other works but as a release into nothingness, from the pain of existence he/the and — it seems, the novelist himself, is no longer able to bear but also to rejoice in the end of what we call civilization. Thus the novelist delights in the violence 'happening in the city its inhabitants thought belonged to them' (p. 429) and in the way in which the paraphernalia of civilization is destroyed. 'It seemed to Eddie Twyborn as though his own share in time were snatched away as though every house he had ever lived in were torn open, the sawdust pouring out of all the dolls in all the rooms ... a few broken bars of a Chabrier waltz scattered from the burst piano' (p. 429).

The defeat here, in fact, though at first it seems to be merely personal — Eadith/Eddie Twyborn is the first of White's protagonists since Elyot and Eden in *The Living and the Dead* to fail to achieve some kind of apotheosis — occurs on a larger scale. White makes a great deal of play here of the pain of being Australian, taking the Australian not only of the type of the suspended man, suspended between belonging and alienation between the aesthetic and the moral and between the two sides of the self, the masculine and the feminine, but also as the type of Protean man<sup>1</sup> who is unable to take or hold any one definite shape of identity but is the victim rather than the master of historical circumstances and physical environment and thus he also suggests that the Australian is thus the type of contemporary man. In previous novels he was prepared to escape in two ways from the consequences of this insight, escaping into the past, into personal memory as a mode of reassurance, and into an ideal of a world of art which is somehow exempt from the pressures of history. Now, however, there is no such escape. The career of his protagonist echoes his own — oscillating between the two sides of the world, involved in a love affair with Greece but also with the Australian landscape, someone from a privileged Australian background who disdains what that background implies yet is equally uneasy in the West End of London. Moreover, what the story tells about is a series of betrayals, of oneself and of others and its aesthetic form is altogether deficient.

What, then, is the significance of this story? In traditional aesthetic terms as we have said it has little significance, and could be dismissed as a failure, an unfortunate and perhaps self-indulgent aberration in the career of a novelist who has always so far given aesthetics a good deal to talk about. But in larger terms it becomes much more significant precisely on account of the way in which it refuses to go on playing according to the rules invoked by traditional criticism. Like its equivalents in the plastic arts, *The Twyborn Affair* dismantles itself, becomes a 'happening' which invades the life of the reader, demanding that he or she participate in something which is no longer a game but is deadly earnest, the experience of becoming someone 'looking at (his) reflection in the glass ... (trying) to convince (himself) of an existence most people take for granted' (p. 221). Then, all sorts of disturbing things begin to occur, identity, even sexual identity, is no longer something to be taken for granted — the protagonist begins as a woman, turns into a man and then back into a woman, to become a man again in the last moments of the story. Nor are the conventional definitions of good and evil adequate, though very clearly good and evil exist and indeed, matter significantly. What we are asked to do is

follow the intrusion of Rimbaud and, indeed, of some of the greatest philosophers and mystics, to the end, to accept that what is outrageous, whatever it is which costs us most pain to conceive, may be the truth, and so learn to live with the truth. Thus, the image of the artist which emerges here is that of the bard, Eadith Trist whose brothel becomes her work of art (with) its reflections, its melting colours, the more material kitchen quarters,

the less and more material girls she was bringing together, each skilled in one or the other modes of human depravity' (p. 322). Nor does this necessarily express cynicism. Edith Trist's work rescues her life and perhaps also her clients' lives from meaninglessness, and if this seems outrageous to conventional morality, then so much the worse for conventional morality. Though her house exists 'for purposes the world considers immoral', Edith reflects that these purposes may also be seen as 'aesthetic — oh yes, and immoral, we know — but no more so than morality can often be. Better to burn than suppurate' (p. 377).

And this perhaps constitutes the significance of *The Teyborn Affair*, the decision to burn rather than suppurate, to attempt to express a vision which perhaps means the end of what we have come to define as civilization and its values. In terms of these values, it is not a successful novel, representing at best an aspect of that movement towards silence which George Steiner suggests flows through the most significant art of this century. One can only hope that these values hold. If not, then this is a novel whose conclusions are likely to return to plague us and our complacencies.

VERONICA BRADY

#### NOTES

1. A phrase coined by the American social psychologist, R. F. Lifton.

R. Shepherd & K. Singh, eds., *Patrick White: a Critical Symposium*. GRNLE, Flinders, 1978. 142 pages. A\$6.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche says, in celebration of Aeschylean Prometheus:

Man raising himself in titanic proportions makes his culture his own through strife, and compels the gods to unite with him because he grasps their existence within his very own wisdom.

The imagination of Patrick White is of this titanic order. His works permit an infinity of approaches and, whilst yielding fruit, yet baffle and elude attempts to circumscribe them in a pat exegesis. The critical essay in which the novelist is being tested turns out, in the end, to have been a testing of the critics, scholars, intelligences, sympathies which engaged in it. In his case scholarly activity only fitfully illumines what it examines. At best it offers a scrawled treasure map, or a briefing on manners and ritual: but always is itself illuminated and elucidated. This above all is what struck your reviewer of this excellent volume, the

Twisting Colonel' in the light of Indian philosophies); by David Tacey (a politically based and as such enlightening reading of *Big Toys*); by May Brit Akerholt (a confident and adroit reading of Jungian allegory in the *Four Plays*); by Cynthia Vanden Dreisen (listing and expounding the successful strategies of Patrick White as religious propagandist); and by Manly Johnson (an essentially allegorical reading of *A Fringe of Leaves* in the light of Vergil and other traditional gurus) – it seems to me that all these papers, invaluable as may be the insights they incidentally unlock, fall into a trap of allegorising what are metaphorical events and must continue to be looked on as such if they are to remain interrogable.

The danger of allegorising a symbolic novel lies in treating its purport as crystallised, as something fixed (albeit 'difficult') that may be translated off, or out of, or – alas – into, the narrative. But Patrick White's art is metaphorical: the purport of each work has to be owed by living through the temporal unfolding, in bony syntax and the textured tissue of style, of a fictional, a *told* experience. Allegory essentially ignores the HOW of art as a gross ladder to higher meaning which is to be kicked away as soon as it has served its purpose; metaphor insists on HOW's primacy and is rooted in the word that compels perception.

And so it seems to me that those essays which are turned, like humble seismographs, on to the recording of regular irregularities in structure and texture come nearest to affording real access to what is going on, and, by their very attentiveness to the actuality of word and page, do justice to both text and reader. David Kelly's close analysis of structural strategies in two chapters of *The Eye of the Storm* opens up true insights, and moreover offers critical tools for further exploration. Paul M. St. Pierre confidently demonstrates how a group of those recurrent metaphors in which fictional incidents are solidified (e.g. tunnel, spiral, eye, etc.) also function as a symbolic code of knots in a hidden net of meaning – in this case a meditation on the nature of time, of ends and beginnings – which delineates the contours of that living vision which ultimately articulates the narrative. Veronica Brady reminds us of this in her excellent summation of the seminar. Finally, she says, the goal of the critic is 'to discover the underlying sense of life, the passionate response from which (the work) arose initially'. In this light, everything within the uttered world of art coheres, everything is eloquent. And yet, I would suggest, it is not to be apprehended or examined – let alone judged – entire in a single overview. Only apprehensions like St. Pierre's of structured reticulations within the linguistic plenitude of White's prose permit the sudden authoritative glimpse of that gleaming living thing with its mindless eye, its power and its glory, 'virtually coiling and uncoiling', which such reticulations are stretched to contain and delineate.

The linguistic nets in White's art are metaphorical. Michael Coster's paper on 'The Function of Imagery in Patrick White's Novels' founders on the reefs of indistinct critical terminology. Since one and the same lexical item may – according to its context or 'horizon' in Veronica Brady's phrase – assume a function as either image, metaphor, symbol, or allegorical sign, it is vital to

record of papers read at a Critical Symposium on Patrick White at Flinders University of South Australia in April 1977.

The reader – however expert and intelligent – whose *Ariadne's* thread into the labyrinth of White's prose is the reality of the understood and social world, necessarily dooms himself to irritation. For example, the puzzle of White's characters appears to have dominated the discussion. Nearly every paper touches upon it, and the student is given an invaluable opportunity to respond to a large variety of promptings from his or her own experience of the novels. Adrian Mitchell's model of character as entity, socially interactive, evolving, making things happen according to his goodwill and capability – the model inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – is at variance with alternative perceptions of character, such as the mystic intuition of fluid ego boundaries, and the heroic conception of character as self-fuel. More appropriate angles on this critical problem are offered by Veronica Brady's vision of character as the crucible of 'intense moral passion' in interaction with the circumambient Other, and by Kirpal Singh's reminder of the Aristotelian emphasis on character as 'a function of action, and not vice versa'.

Patrick White himself illuminates the creative process in *The Vivisector*. He records a life lived in confusion, guilt and change, yet always engaged in active interrogation of meaning by the senses and by the creative hand: that is, self-perceiving, self-uttering. The point reached with the indigo vision at the end is central. It is Nothing, hollow as the hub of a wheel, yet seen from this end point the labyrinthine dance of Hurtle's life sets and becomes Mandala, that is, Meaning. The conception here revealed of being as 'a becoming through time' is beautifully expounded in W. D. Ashcroft's masterly essay on 'More than One Horizon'. That the meaning of Hurtle's life is one which has been artfully contrived by his author is of course a key irony which blows the mind with divine laughter (– and where, by the way, is White's titanic laughter in all these rather dour discussions?). The absurd paradox of Hurtle-painting-the-indigo-eye/being-painted-by-the-demiurgic-obvi-indiggoddd, has been novelistically contrived by an author who is – in a perspective which has become all mirror, all eye – in turn being penned by obvi- WHOM?

The relationship, and the tensions, between the world disclosed by the senses; the various explanations with which we 'understand' it; the art that structures it into new perceived and uttered meanings; and the reality disclosed by means of this mutually interrogative process; is at the heart of the White scholar's problem, and at the root of his confusions. It is for their sufficient distancing from the novelistic, mimetic reality that the papers of Veronica Brady (e.g. 'White's tenderness arises more from relationships between the novelist and reader and the characters in the novel, rather than between the characters themselves'), W. D. Ashcroft and Kirpal Singh bite more deeply into both meaning and craft than those who read the mimesis trustfully as a slice of life. Thus it seems to me that the papers by Ron Shepherd (on 'The

differentiate between these functions and the worlds of experience which they energise. The two-pronged metaphor, which energises patterns of meaningfulness, relies on the solidity of the illusions called up by it. W. D. Ashcroft's paper discusses this problem with sureness and authority. Only from solid, honest flint (the world of the senses) can the spark of meaning, or 'transcendence', be struck. Image is flint. Image struck on image, in the instantaneous subliminal shock of metaphor, sparks meaning. But metaphor is a fugitive thing at the mercy of cultural context and habit, dependent on shared experience and attentive attunement of poet and reader. This arbitrariness is shorted in the true symbol. Symbolic metaphors are fixed, yet fluid. The raw flint of symbol sparks in the unconscious, and energises cultural memories beyond our conscious powers of attention and recall.

In commanding such automatic potencies (compare the 'gods' mentioned in the Nietzsche quotation!) the poet may be the conscious, initiate transmitter of a received gnosis, he may be 'inspired'; it is more reasonable, however, to assume, with Kirpal Singh, that in our day he must become an alchemist and a savant. Certainly the critic who would expound him cannot afford to be less than humbly scholarly and respectful in face of the 'extraordinary range of philosophic, mystic, literary and theological systems, schools and traditions' through which symbolic gnosis must be pursued, as Kirpal Singh suggests, by poet and critic alike in our desacralized culture. Critical discussion of symbol systems *is* fertile, indeed essential; but it needs to be backed by immersion in comparative studies. To be sure, there are shortcuts via William James and Jung, but they offer attenuated vistas. Jung's vast researches into the literature of alchemy, in particular, yielded a catalogue of symbols which undoubtedly ignited Patrick White and many others. They also produced an *ad hoc* psychological interpretation which is, by its very nature, somewhat reductive, limited, biased. It is my own feeling – which I must record – that 'individuation' is an inadequate formulation of the mystic goal and of the impulse underlying White's poesis, whatever its value in the substitute alternative rigidities of structure. The best, to my mind, simply attend to what is there – both on the page and in their own intelligent responses – and record the process with the honest instruments of their trade.

The volume is invaluable to the academic student of Patrick White and must be highly recommended.

ANNEMARIE HEYWOOD



Randolph Stow, *Visitants*. Secker & Warburg, 1979. £5.50.

Randolph Stow, *The Girl Green As Elderflower*. Secker & Warburg, 1980. £5.50.

Two or three of Randolph Stow's previous novels, published almost twenty years ago, are classics of Australian literature. His readers have cherished them through the author's long 'counterfeit silence' in the hope that one day he would break it. The wait has been worthwhile. With two novels published in quick succession, Randolph Stow has surpassed his readers' expectations and confirmed his reputation as one of the most gifted and original novelists now using the English language.

Because Stow is a poet as well as a novelist, his fiction is sometimes described as 'poetic'. There is a truth in this, but it is a misleading description if it suggests that his novels are made for heightened prose which aspires to poetry. His sense of tone is too discriminating for that, though he does have a rare gift for lyrical fiction. But these new novels are controlled by an essentially fictionalizing imagination which has explored the outer reaches of human experience and returned with disturbing, but now also, regenerative visions. The re-integrative power of this imagination is, in fact, a main theme of *The Girl Green As Elderflower*, which charts its operation with more truth and insight than any of the recently fashionable novels which grandiloquently but disrespectfully play with fiction as a subject.

However, Randolph Stow's novels are usually composed with the delicate precision and subtlety of poems, and demand attentive reading, but this does not make them obscure or difficult, for the reader is induced to enter them through a language which is at once transparent and low-keyed while it is exact and evocative. Both *Visitants* and *The Girl Green As Elderflower* are short, and in their different ways, intricately constructed. They are dense and richly suggestive; yet Stow sacrifices surprisingly little to gain compression. Narrative sequence is respected but not allowed to dominate the establishing of other relations of image, symbol, allusion and mythic suggestion by which these stories evoke wonder, and all is delivered in an understated style which preserves a respect for the power of imagination and is the final touch of art which conceals art. The brevity of these books is the outcome of deep contemplation by an artist who has explored the frontiers of his vision without exhausting it or imposing and interpretation upon the world he discovers. His awe for the forces he releases is too great for that, and he modestly contrives to end both books on similar disclaimers by the twelfth century chronicler, William of Newburgh.

The two novels are different in many ways and illustrate the diversity of his genius. Yet they have a common pre-occupation with the creation of myths and the awesome power (and solace) they can bring into focus.

*Visitants* dramatizes this pre-occupation by interweaving the accounts of a number of witnesses to a cargo cult outbreak on a Papuan island at the edge of the Solomon Sea. It is, obviously, a perfect subject for a writer concerned with mythomorphic processes and Stow handles it brilliantly, gradually revealing the transformation of western history in the region — from the arrival of d'Entrecasteaux to the aftermath of the war against Japan and the apparition of U.F.O.'s — into a myth of terrifying destructiveness. Incorporated into this are accounts of islanders and whites clashing, or trying to relate to each other and come to terms with themselves. Stow's gift for projecting himself into the world and minds of the islanders (three of whom tell more than half the story) is completely

convincing and relocates the reader's cultural perspective so that he is led to see the whites as 'visitants' and the horrors which result from their presence as a revelation of the darkness in civilized man's own nature. The comparison with Conrad is obvious, but should not be pressed to the point of overshadowing the different merits of *Visitants*, and it must be said at once that in some ways it is a better book than *Heart of Darkness*, in the controlled tone of its telling, in its carefully integrated patterning, in the deeper potential of Stow's myth and his insistence in following it to its grim conclusion.

Throughout *Visitants*, with his acknowledged gift for unobtrusive descriptive writing, Randolph Stow vividly evokes the Melanesian Islands and the seas around them. His books have always been imbued with a strong sense of place, and in *The Girl Green As Elderflower* it is a prominent theme. But the place is not a frontier of western civilization, like the desiccated world of *Tourmaline*, the fabled Australia of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* or the lush tropical islands of the South West Pacific, but 'scely Suffolk' to which two of the characters drink a toast in the closing sentence of the book. In Suffolk the protagonist, Crispin Clare, does not disintegrate, the victim of dark forces, but rather discovers in the legends and folklore of this well-trodden region the means to re-integration. The book is therefore in some respects the opposite of *Visitants*; lighter in tone, pervaded by deftly underplayed humour and peopled by mainly beneficent (or at least neutral) spirits. *Felshais* comes equipped with an epigraph from *The Tempest*, from which Randolph Stow also took the epigraph to his very first novel, *A Haunted Land*, but the allusion is equally relevant to *The Girl Green As Elderflower* with its wild man, ethereal sprites and emphasis on regeneration and the power of art.

*The Girl Green As Elderflower* is centred in the family and stands in the same relation to *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* as *Visitants* does to *Tourmaline* (though the parallel cannot be pushed very far). Through family, the region and its houses are linked to the past, and in various local versions of the past, but particularly in three twelfth-century Latin chronicles, Crispin reads wondrous stories which become transformed into family legends. These are interwoven with the account of his slow recovery through half a year, from New Year's Day to midsummer, and his engagement with the recently bereft branch of his family, to create a restorative myth, mysteriously resonant, like the bells of Bury, which chime through the book, calling the children of the Antipodes.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS

*The New Quarterly Case* (vol. I, 1-4; vol. II, 1-4) and *Pacific Quarterly Moana* (vol. III, 1-4; vol. IV, 1-4) 1976-79. Published by Outrigger Publishers Ltd., 1 Von Tempsky Street, Hamilton, New Zealand. Edited by Norman Simms.

In *NQC* (vol. II, 3) Frederick G. Parmee expressed the hope that *NQC* would become 'wildly experimental' and that its contributors would explore every 'creative byway they could find', for what is (was) needed was the 'craziest creativity, devoid of any literary tradition' in order to achieve anything 'distinctly New Zealand'. Has this been achieved? It is true that variety characterizes *NQC*, but I am not so sure that variety is always such a good thing. *NQC* contains almost too much, and yet somehow too little: articles on Hungarian film, Chinese politics, and German

*Berufsvorbot*; Australian cave paintings, realistic New Zealand stories and sketches, poems in English as well as poems in translation (Colombian, Brazilian, Turkish and Polish, Swedish and Swahili), traditional lit. crit., myths and legends.

What you can do in a review is to concentrate on the editorial policies of the quarterly and on some of the articles that relate themselves more or less explicitly to the editorial statements. From these sources one may hope to find out what are the principles for selecting the poems and articles actually published, and even hope to find out for whom *NQC* is published. In a Preface to vol. 1, 4 we are informed that *NQC* is New Zealand based and that the intention is to 'promote the cause of living literature and culture in a wide sense'. By 'living' is meant the ideas and arts that play a 'vital part in the life and ideas of human society everywhere'. That is quite a mouthful, and who would not find it hard to say what it actually means to promote the cause of living literature — which cause, whose cause? There is no limit, then, to the topics that may be included ('ekistics' for example) as long as they are 'an international good' and as long as they may be read with 'profit'. In vol. II, 3 the editorial is even more explicit and says that *NQC* is based on a 'policy of multi-culturalism and multi-lingualism' and also that culture is seen as including 'all modes of human communication and expression'. (The motto for no. 3 comes from Hugh MacDiarmid.) In vol. II, 4 is another editorial (this time with a motto from Seghers) in which New Zealand is said to be 'a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country' and that *NQC* will contribute to the growth of a multi-cultural and multi-lingual community — apparently New Zealand is not aware that it is 'multi'. Also we find expressed a need to re-appraise New Zealand literary history in the light of the presence of oral/written as well as urban/tribal traditions; the usual anxiety of belonging to, or merely being a supplement to, Anglo-American-Australian schools of thought is also voiced. In this connection one may mention that the name Cave refers to Plato's cave, the New Zealanders presumably being the prisoners, whom the editors will show the light. I wonder whether the above representation of NZ society and literary history is true; & NZ multi-cultural/lingual or ought it to be? Can a crazy creativity release the NZ prisoners from the cave? It seems to me that the program of *NQC* sounds somewhat pseudo-McLuhanite. Describing the ideal New Zealand as a sort of 'Global Village', in the sense of the Canadian Magus. It is true, though, that the editors try to follow the stated intentions.

Most texts found in *NQC* can be said to contribute to either the multi-cultural or the multi-lingual; it also accounts for the presence of several articles by Jan Knappert on African myth and legends. (Knappert is professor of African languages and on the editorial board.) It is also the reason why we find articles on translation and quite a number of translated texts, amongst them translations from Bulgarian and Turkish, specimens of Cook Islands-poetry legends from Papua/NG. But how can an article on 'The Pathos and Pageantry of the Jacobin Revolution' or on *Berufsvorbot* in Germany or on China on the eve of revolution contribute to a re-appraisal of NZ literary history?

In an introduction to *A Book of New Zealand* the late J. C. Reid (who some ten years ago introduced me to NZ poetry) wrote about the fact that NZ was 'lacking fruitful cultural tensions' and that it (NZ society) 'has also been subject to a deadly uniformity and mediocrity of outlook', but that the Maori 'has provided a leavening influence' and that the influx of 'settlers from Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland and elsewhere has led to a slight, but important, modification of New Zealand

stodginess'. Where J. C. Reid talked about 'modification' (in 1963), Frederick C. Parmer, in the above cited article, talks about tossing tradition out of the window and of beginning to scratch. The sentiment behind Parmer's pronouncements and of the editorial staff (?) is of the same nature as some of the ideas expressed by the New Writers in Australia (Michael Wilkins et alii). The idea seems to be that if New Zealand literature is to be re-vitalized the impulse or influence is to come from myths, from indigenous literatures (from the Solomon Islands rather than the British Islands) and, most important, from translations from everywhere and every time; and translations from 'out of context' so that it can be assured that the traditions they belong to (the translated poems) can be obscured. It is telling that a long article is devoted to the poetry of Hone Tuwhare (vol. 1, 4). Tuwhare is important in a *NQC* context because he is said to be in contact with that lost world of myth, that is to say, myths 'not learnt from written sources but *felt orally* as part of a *living tradition*' (my italics). But is this nostalgia for a lost, oral, natural, mythic world not a telling symptom of a thoroughly modern alienation from it; a desire for a lost world of presence and the Full Word which is irrevocably lost, if it ever did exist? Is not that part of *NQC*'s project doomed from the beginning? Did not two modern poets of an old civilization — Pound and Joyce — go back to the mythical beginnings of European literature (Homer) in order to re-vitalize it. Can that gesture be repeated?

In 1978 *NQC* changed into *Pacific Quarterly Moana*. No new editorials. It has now become a more 'traditional' literary quarterly. And a better one. It contains competently written articles on for instance 'crime in literature', articles on Australian literature (also-called General Issue, vol. IV, 4), surveys of the new Latin-American narrative, poems on Indian Ocean Themes and, still, many translations and a special number about translation.

Edgar Morin, the French sociologist, once said that European-American civilization had lost its vitality and he prophesied the emergence of a new one in the Pacific cultural centre: Japan on the one side, California on the other, the nations of the Pacific Ocean in the middle. Could *Moana* be the first sign that Morin's prophecy is beginning to come true? We can only hope so.

HANS HAUGE

## Journals

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### CHANDRABHAGA

This is a new Indian journal edited by one of India's major poets, Jayanta Mahapatra. In his editorial to the first issue Jayanta Mahapatra writes:

We consider English to be a major Indian language, like the fifteen major languages used in various areas of India.

So we shall try to publish Indian writing in English, in the main. We shall also use translations from the regional languages, in English. But the scope of *Chandrabhaga* shall not be limited to the geographical boundaries of this country: we will use whatever we feel is relevant to writing and writers around the world, because we believe in a healthy feedback between Indian and non-Indian writing.

In keeping with this policy the first two issues include among others things poems and short stories by Indian writers, articles on Wallace Stevens, J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Shiv K. Kumar's poetry, a conversation with Raja Rao and an article by Rabi S. Mishra on A. K. Ramanujan's poetry. This article led to a reply by R. Parthasarathy and Mishra has in turn replied to Parthasarathy.

The journal is attractively produced and what is important (and sometimes rare in Indian publications in English) is carefully proof read.

If the first two issues are any indication *Chandrabhaga* can look forward to a bright future which it deserves. It appears twice a year, cost is \$10 and all correspondence should be sent to the Editor, Tinkona Bagicha, Cutack 753 001, Orissa, India.

#### PACIFIC QUARTERLY MOANA

The October, 1979 issue (Vol. IV, No. 4) of this international review of arts and ideas has a special 32 page section on Australian writing. Of particular interest and I believe of value to scholars of Australian literature is Michael Wilding's review/article of Fred Lock and Alan Lawson, *Australian Literature: A Reference Guide* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1977). Wilding quite rightly takes Lock and Lawson to task because of the narrowness and conservatism of their work and at the same time provides an additional bibliography that will do much to atone for the omissions in the other bibliography. As the editors of *Pacific Quarterly Moana* suggest, Wilding's article is much more than a review. It raises important issues and it is to be hoped that these issues will be taken up and discussed in future issues of this journal. Ken Gelder's article 'Uncertainty and Subversion in the Australian Novel: Recent Fiction in a Framework' is very much a repeat of his article in *Waves*. For a further discussion of *Pacific Quarterly Moana* see the Review section of this issue of *Kumajibi*.

#### WAVES

The Summer 1979 issue (Vol. VII, No. 4) of this Canadian journal of creative writing is a special issue on Australian writing. It contains fiction and poetry by many of Australia's established and 'less' established writers and an article by Ken Gelder on 'Character and Environment in Some Recent Australian Fiction'.

It must be Australia's year for the double August-September issue of *The London Magazine* will be a special one on Australia.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

# ACLALS

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## SUVA CONFERENCE, 1980

The Fifth Triennial ACLALS Conference was held on the campus of the University of the South Pacific in Suva 5-8 January, 1980. It was attended by approximately 150 writers and scholars from 25 countries. Satendra Nandan and the other organizers are to be congratulated on a very successful conference. There was a very full programme with over 70 papers to be read as well as three plenary sessions and two public readings. The papers are to be published by Dr Satendra Nandan.

The organizers did everything possible to make the visitors' stay on the island as enjoyable as possible. Numerous receptions were arranged in the evenings hosted by the Vice Chancellor, the Mayor of Suva and the Indian High Commission, and there was an excursion to the Fijian Cultural Centre.

Accommodation and meals were provided on campus for a ridiculously low fee. Admittedly the accommodation was spartan, but it was spotlessly clean. It was therefore amusing and somewhat depressing to find almost half the overseas delegates fleeing after the first night to hotel accommodation in Suva. It is unrealistic to come to a climate like this and not expect cockroaches. The people who left are the same people who write about the Third World, beat their breasts about inequality and the plight of the little man. The irony of their departure was made even sharper by the fact that the majority moved into the Grand Pacific Hotel, a mini Raffles. There is an even nicer irony. The Grand Pacific has two wings, the old colonial wing and the modern wing. All the delegates moved into the colonial wing — it was cheaper!

## ACLALS (EUROPEAN BRANCH)

The next European conference will take place in Frankfurt/Main, West Germany, from 23 to 27 March 1981. The theme of the conference is *History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature*.

Those wishing to participate in the conference kindly contact Professor Dr Dieter Riemenschneider, Institut für England- und Amerikastudien, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, Kettenhofweg 150, 6 Frankfurt/Main, West Germany.

There will be a registration fee of DM30 to be paid on arrival in Frankfurt.

## NEW ZEALAND ARTS FESTIVAL, AARHUS

There will be a New Zealand Arts Festival and Conference in Aarhus from 10 to 17 November 1980. It will be run along similar lines to the Australian Arts Festival held in Aarhus in 1978.

The theme of the conference is 'New Zealand through the eyes of her writers'.

Any persons wishing to attend and/or give a paper should contact Anna Rutherford, Department of English, University of Aarhus, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

## LITERARY PRIZES

### ACLALS (EUROPE) SHORT STORY COMPETITION

The European branch of ACLALS invites entries for its short story competition. Persons eligible are citizens of Commonwealth countries other than Britain (nationals of other countries living in Britain are eligible).

The prize money is 3,000 Danish kroner and there is an entry fee of 30 kroner. Three copies of each entry must be submitted and the organisers reserve the right to publish any entry in *Knappejt*, the journal of the association.

Closing date for entries is 31 January and results will be announced in June, 1981.

Entries should be sent to The Chairperson, ACLALS (Europe), Department of English, University of Aarhus, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

### COMMONWEALTH POETRY PRIZE 1980

The prize of £100 is awarded annually for a first published book of poetry in English by an author from a Commonwealth country other than Britain (nationals of other countries living in Britain are eligible).

Publishers are requested to submit titles published between 1 July 1979 and 30 June 1980. Seven copies of each title, for retention by the Judges, should be received not later than 30 June 1980. Manuscripts cannot be accepted.

A brief account of the author's life and career should accompany entries, and should include the place and date of birth and current address.

The award will be announced at the end of August 1980.

Send entries to: The Librarian (Poetry Prize), Commonwealth Institute, Kensington High Street, London W8 6NQ, Gt Britain.

## THE JOURNAL OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

The above journal wishes to bring out a special issue on contemporary writing in English on India by people of non-Indian origin. This has not been paid any concerted critical attention since Independence (1947), and there is a quite inaccurate impression that Western creative literary interest in India is dying.

JJWE needs approximately £100 for the venture. Support from grant-making organizations is, we understand, unlikely for one special issue. The viability of the issue therefore depends on support from private individuals and JJWE will be most grateful for any support, however small, that you as an ACLALS member feel able to give.

The special issue will include creative writing by people of non-Indian origin, and critical writing on such work by people of all backgrounds. Suitable contributions are invited for consideration. Please enclose an fee with stamps or IRCs if a reply is desired. The deadline for submissions is 31 December 1980. All correspondence to the Guest Editor, Prabhu S. Gupta, Vine House, Whelford, near Fairford, Glos., UK.

Annual subscriptions to JJWE cost £2 by sea and £4 by air.

## EACLALS NEWSHEET

All paid up members of EACLALS as of 31 March 1980 were sent an EACLALS NEWSHEET containing

1. Reports on
  - A. General meeting of ACLALS, Fiji, 8 January 1980
  - B. Executive meeting of ACLALS, Fiji, 6 January 1980
  - C. General meeting of EACLALS, Fiji, 8 January 1980
2. Call for nominations
3. Articles of Association
4. Information about EACLALS conference, Frankfurt, 1981

If any financial members did not receive this Newsheet *please* contact Anna Rutherford.

## ELECTION OF OFFICERS FOR THE 1980-83 TRIENNIAL PERIOD

Only one nomination was received nominating Anna Rutherford as Chairperson, Hena Maes-Jelinek as Secretary and Alastair Niven as Treasurer. As there were no other nominations these three people were elected.

Donald Hannah  
Returning Officer



# Conferences

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## First Festival of World Cultures — Horizons 79, Berlin, 21 June to 15 July 1979.

Berlin, well-known for its international festivals, added yet one more to an already impressive list, namely the *First Festival of World Cultures, Horizons 79*. It was the organisers' intention, as Willy Brandt put it in his foreword to *Magazine*, the official programme of the Festival, to add the cultural aspect to the politico-economic dialogue between North and South. Whether the festival achieved this noble aim will have to be answered by those who participated: the many African artists and scholars and the German public. The opportunity was unique. Those interested in music could enjoy folklore, griots and jazz concerts; film fans had the opportunity of watching three films daily including all of Ousmane Sembène's productions; theatre groups from West, East and North Africa presented their plays, among them the Nairobi University Players directed by J. Ruganda with a Swahili version of Brecht's play *The Good Person of Semeu*, and The School of Performing Arts from Legon, Ghana, with J. de Graft's *Mamba*. There were a number of exhibitions, most notably one of paintings from Haiti and one of modern African art which included paintings, drawings, 'square' paintings, truck art, examples of Middle Art and wooden sculptures. Dancing and music groups from Ghana, Mali, Madagascar and Zaïre presented yet another aspect of African culture. Finally, apart from several more exhibitions, there was a literature programme consisting of public readings by African authors and a workshop. Though much could be said about the Festival in general or about one or the other item, e.g. the theatre programme, I shall confine myself to a few remarks about the literature programme.

African literature in English, French or Portuguese is still little known in Germany. It is only recently that, after a lapse of many years during which Johannes Jahn actively promoted African literature in this country, a small group of enthusiasts has taken up the challenge to introduce this literature to a German reading public. Among others there are two publishing houses, Hammer from Wuppertal, and Walter from Olten who have started 'Dialogue Africa', the publication of African novels — translated into German. The International Frankfurt Book Fair will have literature from Africa as its special feature in 1980. The invitation of some of the most prominent and well known African authors to Berlin thus was a *must*. Though it seemed doubtful at first whether it would be possible to have so many of them in Berlin for at least one week the idea of introducing writers such as C. Achebe, W. Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, M. Mwangi, B. Head, D. Brutus, N. Farah, C. Laye, M. Beti, E. Dougala, A. Kourouma, T. Salih, T. Le Liyong and others in person to a German audience was exciting and fortunately materialized in the end. Not all the writers invited were able to attend, among them Ngugi and Philombe, Ousmane, Dadif and Awoonor. While the absence was regrettable especially

of those authors, who were not given permission to leave their countries, writers from Angola and Mozambique preferred to attend a literature conference in Africa.

The often precarious relationship between literature and politics or art and reality in Africa which these events indicate found its reflection in 'Politics and Exile', the most important topic to be discussed in the Writers Workshop which took place in one of Berlin's posh congress centres, the Kongresshalle, from 25 to 27 June. Other topics included 'Political-Social Commitment', 'Language and Audience', 'Popular Urban Literature' and, last but not least, the ever recurring question whether African literature is *élite*.

Writers as well as specially invited guests were perplexed about the organizer's idea of tucking the workshop well away from the public eye. There was no mention of it in the official programme and neither the media nor the generally interested public were aware of it. During the first two days a small student group from Frankfurt formed fifty percent of the audience. The writers had to organize themselves on the first day after an hour of waiting and a preliminary discussion about who was to blame and how to proceed since the organizer of the workshop was not present. It was proof of the organizational skill of D. Brutus, N. Farah, L. Peters and others that a programme was charted out within a short time and that discussion on 'Politics and Exile' started just before the first break of two and a half hours! All topics suggested were discussed during the following three days though, of course, ready-made answers, or solutions, new or original approaches and suggestions were hardly presented. For this the writers were least to blame, especially since they had expected an introduction by the organizer into the purpose and intentions of the workshop as well as into the special situation they confronted in Germany. On the whole discussions, though lively and controversial, remained rather academic and it happened only rarely that a participant directed the attention of the workshop to the fact that it happened to be taking place in Germany. Here again the organizer must be blamed since only a very few non-Africans were present, and how then is a dialogue between North and South to materialize when the North is virtually absent?

But to come back to the discussions, I would like to mention three points only. One of the most moving moments occurred right at the beginning when Beside Head talked about South Africa as a hideous place to live in, a country which does not allow non-whites to go where they choose, to say what they want and to live a life of their own. L. Nkosi and D. Brutus expanded on this point in two directions: Nkosi by arguing succinctly and convincingly that African writing from the beginning until today had always been created out of a position of opposition, opposition against colonialism, racism and neo-colonialism. D. Brutus drew attention to the political aspect rather than the artistic one by asking the question in how far Germans were aware of the strong economic, financial and military ties between the racist South African regime and the Federal Republic. However, it seemed that nobody was really willing to follow up his argument, on the contrary, some of his French speaking colleagues were hesitant and unwilling to discuss 'Politics and Exile' from a general political angle but preferred to draw attention to the personal plight of exiled writers.

Differences between French and English speaking writers became even more obvious when 'Language and Audience' was discussed. It seemed, however, that misunderstanding was often caused by a lack of communication between the two groups. Thus while Le Liyong, L. Peters and others argued that the resolution of the Dakar 1976 meeting of the Union of the Writers of the African Peoples (UWAP) to introduce Swahili

as the African language might be a worthwhile discussion, M. Bedi refused to entertain such a non- or rather anti-African idea for which he blamed the UNESCO. Still, the question of language continued to remain a controversial issue. A solution might perhaps be found in the reaction of the African audience to novels written in an African language, e.g. to Ngugi's new novel *Devil on the Cross* which is to be published first in Kikuyu.

The reaction of the African audience to literature written in English or French, finally, is at the core of the question whether this literature is *elitist*. In the workshop it appeared that this problem has lost nothing of its touchiness since it implies that each writer has to define for himself and his audience what it means to be an *African* writer and what his relationship to his own people is. Again, answers presented in the workshop were as many as there were writers present and the discussion of this final topic ended on a rather inconclusive note.

It is regrettable that only a few Germans had the opportunity of experiencing this because the usually ritualized performance of a public reading will not easily reveal this fact. Still, it is one way of confronting an author with his readers, and this was the intention of Künstlerhaus Bethanien which hosted BILT 79 (Berlin International Literature Days 79). Every evening for one week African authors read mainly from their published works starting, fittingly, with Achebe on 23 June. He was followed by — to name only a few — Leye, Peters, Dongala, Head, Brutus, Bedi, Kourouma, Salih, Farah, and Lo Liyong. The programme ended with Soyinka's drum-accompanied recitation of *Ogun Abibiman* on 1 July. Though it was not easy to find one's way to Kreuzberg and Künstlerhaus Bethanien which is situated close to the Berlin Wall the response of the German public showed the great interest in African literature. The evenings usually started with a well-prepared introduction by U. Beier followed by readings of two authors and griot recitations. The excellent idea of juxtaposing written and oral literature, however, lost much of its charm because no explanation about or translation of the griots' songs was available. On the other hand written texts were not only read in their original language but also in German though these translations were available from a small bookshop outside the hall. Organizational clumsiness, unfortunately, again affected the programme and left little time for discussion with the authors, time which was usually spent by extracting some more information from them. Though BILT 79 must be praised for the attempt to introduce African authors to this country it also must take the blame for not really contributing towards that often quoted dialogue between North and South. Neither the workshop nor the nights in Kreuzberg left much time to the authors to ask their questions and voice their opinions about Germany.

Regrettably, many African writers and German participants of the literature programme left with the feeling that because of lack of perception, organizational slops, petty personal rivalries and commercial attitudes an excellent opportunity had not really been exploited to full advantage in the effort to contribute towards an exchange of cultural ideas between Africa and Germany. To expect this from a festival of the scale and nature of *Horizons 79* was perhaps wrong and a bit unrealistic.

DIETER RIEMENSCHNEIDER

On 8-9 May 1980, on the occasion of the annual Congress of the S.A.E.S. (Société des Anglistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur), the French 'Société d'Etude des Pays du Commonwealth', which is a member of ACLALS, held a seminar in Poitiers, with Anna Rutherford, from the University of Aarhus, as president of the proceedings. The first day was devoted to *A Fringe of Leaves* by Patrick White. A paper given by A. Dominguez (Paris X), 'Les Aborigènes dans *A Fringe of Leaves*', was followed by a talk from G. Roderick on 'Patrick White: From *Aureole* to *Figleaf Time*'. A debate ensued, chaired by Anna Rutherford, which extended to more recent works like *The Teyborn Affair*.

The next day was to be entirely devoted to *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi. J. Bardolph (Nice) treated the theme 'Fertility in *Petals of Blood*', stressing the continuity with the previous novels but also the new development of the vision. After this paper on the metaphors of germination, E. Albrecht (Paris X) chose 'Fire and Blood' as structuring images, with special references to religious symbolism. From a different angle, J. P. Durix (Dijon) examined the tension between commitment and retreat, in 'Politics in *Petals of Blood*'. A. R. Richard (Montpellier) and C. Abdelkrim (Paris III) complemented the reflexion on this aspect of the book with two essays on 'Time and history' and 'Recit, narration, histoire'. These contributions led to a long debate, in a round table chaired by J. Bardolph, on the problems raised by the optimistic ending, the narrative sequence, the conception of history, and, more generally, the evolution of the novel as a genre in present day Africa.

These papers will appear, in English, in a special number of 'Echos du Commonwealth', published by the Société d'Etudes des Pays du Commonwealth, to be issued next in Autumn 1980 (write to J. Leflaire, 35, rue Charles Lenepveu, 76130 Mont-Saint-Aignan (France)).

JACQUELINE BARDOLPH

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Volume I no. 1, 1981—ISSN 0021-8758. Published twice annually. 211 x 140 mm

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